

THAT WHICH WAS LOST



THE DARK ANGELS

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of FRANÇOIS MAURIAC

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In preparation

LE MYSTÈRE FRONTENAC (*English title not yet decided*)

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Soon after Messrs. Eyre and Spottiswoode had announced the present uniform edition of the novels of François Mauriac, their attention was directed to the translation of *Ce qui était perdu* which Captain J. H. F. McEwen had already completed. Since there seemed no point in duplicating this particular title or in wasting an admirable translation it was arranged that Captain McEwen's version should appear in the uniform edition.

G. H.

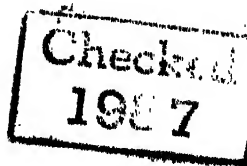
FRANÇOIS MAURIAC

THAT WHICH WAS LOST

(Ce Qui Était Perdu)

Translated by
J. H. F. McEWEN

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THAT WHICH WAS LOST

I

"I FEEL better now," said Irène de Blénauge. "We might have stayed a few minutes longer."

There was no light in the car, but Irène could picture to herself well enough without seeing it the crestfallen expression on her husband's face; that spiteful air he always assumed when deprived of the smallest pleasure.

"You signalled to me that you wanted to go," she added.

"And it was high time, darling; you looked a sight."

After six years of marriage Irène still suffered, as on the first day, from the disparity between these terms of endearment and the cruel words which accompanied them.

"I am the more sorry," she said, "as you were in such good form this evening; I never saw you in better."

She would have liked to have said no more; what was the use after all, of irritating him?

"Frankly, it surprises me that I should have been able to shine in your presence when I know that every word I speak is criticized and examined. . . . What is the matter, Irène?"

The headlights of a following car brought into momentary prominence the young woman's drooping head.

"I'll be all right in a minute. But it is time I was home, or I shall be late for my gardenal."

Then, more softly, and as if the pain had recalled her to the facing of realities, she added: "But, believe me, Hervé, I do wish that when you are in company you would be more on your guard. People make you talk, but afterwards they blame you for what you have said."

Hervé, in a tone somewhat lacking in conviction, protested that, at any rate so far as this evening was concerned, he was

entirely blameless, but Irène interrupted him: "You know very well, on the contrary, with what I am reproaching you for having said. Why pretend that you don't know what I mean?" she added angrily, after the manner of a sick person whose self-control is only by an effort maintained. She could never accustom herself to Hervé's lies, to the chronic state of lying in which, almost unconsciously, he lived.

"You were very unkind about your friend Marcel Revaux."

"My friend! It's you that he admires, that he praises to the skies. Have you forgotten that he never even told me that he was getting married?"

"I know," she said, "that you dislike him. Although I sometimes wonder all the same whether he isn't the only creature who counts so far as you are concerned. But I know that you will never forgive him for ringing you up. . . ." And with a gaiety which, coming from her, always had a slightly macabre ring, she mimicked the voice of Marcel Revaux: "By the way, I forgot to tell you that I am getting married to-day."

Hervé remarked, dryly, that for him the incident was less funny than she appeared to find it. He added that while he had not broken with Marcel Revaux he saw no reason why he should not say what he liked about him.

"You've done that already," she answered; "you said the most awful things about Marcel this very evening."

"Well, what did I say? I said that his genius—and genius was the word I used—was in fact his youth; that while some men are enriched by life, he becomes poorer with every year that passes. He has not written a line for goodness knows how long and cares for nothing but stocks and shares. Nobody but you denies that Marcel is hopeless. In 1918 he was the mouthpiece of his generation: then, he could get away with anything. . . ."

"Yes," interrupted Irène, irritably, "and you had the face, on that account, in front of people whom you know to be quite

pitiless, to refer to his liaison with Marie Chavès; you even mentioned certain rumours. . . ."

Her indignation flared up, the indignation of a wife who has been humiliated: she hated Hervé for having behaved like a cad before strangers. He protested that it was common knowledge; that Marcel had always spent Marie's money quite openly. Obviously no one could suppose that it was his father, a floor manager at the *Galleries*, who provided him with such lavish means.

"I would be ready to repeat to his face every word that I have spoken of him."

"No, Hervé, you know quite well you would never dare. But, apart from that, do you know why he keeps you at arm's length?"

But Hervé denied that Marcel kept him at arm's length:

"The other day he asked me to drop in on him, like I used to do in the old days, when I would see from the street whether there was a light burning in the studio, and if there was I would go up. . . ."

Irène sighed.

"My dear Hervé, you forget that only last night you told me about that invitation of Marcel's, but then it had quite a different meaning: 'If you see a light,' he said, 'you may come up as before. But,' he added, 'I regret to say that there never will be a light, for Tota likes to go out at nights, and even on the rare occasions when we do stay at home we use the room at the back that looks on to the courtyard, not the studio!' And besides he has not yet introduced you to his wife."

How this perpetual bringing the subject back to the point annoyed Hervé! It would ever, he supposed, be a source of pleasure to Irène to make him contradict himself.

"Once again, darling, you have misunderstood. Possibly you were not fully awake at the time," he added, maliciously.

"There is no need to work yourself up about it, I assure you that you are wrong."

Her only answer was a forced laugh, and a "Come, come, Hervé!" which placed him quite clearly in the category of small boys who have been caught telling lies.

"As a matter of fact," he said, with an injured air, "I was intending to go this very evening to the rue Vancau and if there should be a light in Marcel's window . . ."

"But there won't be."

"Well then I'll come home again."

"No," said Irène quietly, "you know quite well that you won't come home."

They were passing the darkness of the Bois de Boulogne and it was not possible for her to make out the expression on her husband's face—that face so prematurely aged in spite of the clearness of those seemingly innocent eyes. As they neared the Place de la Concorde she said suddenly:

"Stay with me to-night, Hervé. I don't feel very well."

She was breathing quickly. Furtively he glanced at her pale face, her thin neck, so tenuous and stringy, almost like that of a bird.

"You know quite well," he said, "that as soon as you have taken your cachets you will go off to sleep and I shall be of no more use to you. I must get a breath of air and stretch my legs, otherwise I'll not sleep a wink. It's not my fault if I get like this. Nor yours, either, of course. . . . The pain you suffer . . . They may well say it affects the nerves; any other person would be far more irritable, I'm sure."

He did not notice that Irène shrugged her shoulders. She merely replied that he was no doubt right and that in any case she felt better. He helped her out of the car and rang the bell.

"If I see Marcel I swear I'll repeat to him every word I said about him this evening."

It was on the tip of her tongue to reply: You know perfectly well you won't see him, but she refrained and merely said:

"I agree that next time you do see him you will no doubt let him know a few things which won't be any pleasure for him to listen to. But I suspect that they will be more suitably clothed than were some of the expressions you used about him this evening. You have such good manners." And she shut the door. His eyes followed, through the glass, her tall, shadowy figure. She moved slowly, almost unsteadily, with one hand against the wall.

II

HERVE stepped out briskly, muttering to himself: "Fool! . . . Impossible woman! . . . To hell with her!" But a feeling of shame at his heartless behaviour in refusing to stay with Irène nevertheless possessed him. It humiliated him also to think that she knew what use he was going to make of his liberty this night.

"And yet," he said, half aloud, "I was not lying: I am going round by rue Vaneau, and if I see a light I'll go in."

He knew that there would be no light and that he would stop the first taxi he saw. He knew what address he would give to the driver—or rather, no; he would tell him to stop at the Place de la Madeleine: that were perhaps wiser.

The rainy wind carried with it a faint promise of spring for all that February was not yet out. Hervé thought of Marcel married, and how strange it was that now when he was to all intents finished he should appear to be so happy. Hervé had

marked his decline with that sour enjoyment which such persons never fail to find in the degeneration of one whom they have once held in affection. "It is he that is the liar," thought Hervé. "He boasts that he has always hated and despised literature and has given it up willingly: he actually glories in his sterility and quotes the example of Rimbaud. . . . Irène deliberately shuts her eyes to the fact that he has merely run dry. Liar! And a worse one than I am really. What's the good of Irène being so annoyed: did he or did he not, after all, live on Marie Chavès's money? That hundred thousand francs with which he gambled in American funds—everyone knows where that came from. . . . And yet all that doesn't prevent Irène from thinking him a damned fine fellow. . . . Marcel has behaved shabbily, too, towards his father: he is always inventing excuses for keeping him out of the picture, merely because he is ashamed of him. But Irène won't have it that even that is against him; she mentions that it was right, that it was his duty to break with his people for the very reason that they were in humble circumstances, and could never understand him. She will find a high-falutin' motive for any action of his, even the lowest: the reason being that she admires his character; it is upon character that people judge us, not upon what we do. And to think of the way he has treated me!" Whereat he raged again at the thought of that latest insult when, on the telephone casually, and a propos of nothing at all, Marcel had remarked: "By the way, I forgot to tell you that I am getting married to-day."

After crossing the rue de Babylone Hervé found himself in the rue Vaneau, and so certain was he that there would be no light in the well-remembered window that he barely troubled to look up. Thus it was that when first he noticed the square of light standing out, beacon-like, high up in the darkened building he imagined it must be upon another floor. Could it be that Marcel was at home this evening after all? And not in his own

son but in the studio, as in his bachelor days? Maybe his wife was making him work? Or was it perhaps against her wishes and because he was already beginning to be bored with her? or nothing lasted for ever; such a moment was bound to come sooner or later. Her little hour had not lasted long! Plainly this light showing at so late an hour was a sign. . . . Moreover it was not just the little oil cruse over the sofa but the proper lamp, the work-lamp, which in their youth, making use of an expression culled from Barrès, they called the "studious and romantic lamp." What then if he went up as before? He risked nothing worse by so doing than a polite snub. And yet after the insult he had already suffered Hervé felt he could not put up with much more from Marcel. "If to-night he is deliberately rude I swear I'll never see him again as long as I live. The best plan is to make bold front and say right away that I am only coming in for a minute."

He got into the lift, and the light went out; with a thumping cart he went up through layers of darkness which became less opaque the higher he got. He rang the bell; silence; then a door opened within the flat and he recognised the rapid and rather catty footstep.

"I'm not being a nuisance? I just happened to be passing . . ."

"But come in: I'm all alone."

"All alone? How's that?"

Hervé was quite unaware of the astonishment and joy which his voice betrayed. The expression of tolerant contempt on his friend's face, an expression which he had often noticed before without always sensing the reason for it, ought to have warned him. But his curiosity blinded him: he was at the mercy of a suddenly-conceived and wild hope.

"How is it that you are alone at this time of night?"

The other replied only by giving a short laugh, and showed him into the studio. Within the circle of light cast by the carcel

lamp was an album into which Marcel had apparently been pasting photographs when interrupted by Hervé's call.

"Photographs of our travels," he said.

In every photograph the same young woman's figure appeared. Hervé sat himself down in his accustomed place, on the divan, which, he noticed, had been made up as a temporary bed. For whom? Was Marcel no longer sleeping with his wife? Was she enceinte, perhaps, or ill? His innocent eyes were alight with curiosity as he lowered himself onto the coverlet, taking care not to touch the sheet. Marcel, who remained standing, appeared to tower over him. And how he had aged! No one could say of him any longer that he looked a young man. And he was getting stout.

"Yes; the fact is she's gone out."

"Alone? You let her go by herself?"

A vague suspicion assailed Hervé that he might be letting himself in for a rebuff, but the demon of curiosity was irresistible and to it, as to his passion for the catastrophic in life, he surrendered. Such an evil inquisitiveness as he had hidden away as it were in a dark corner of his being, which came to light only when impelled by such occasions as this. And he who believed himself to be good natured, whose heart was easily touched, and who possessed the gift of facile tears, preserved since childhood sought still to avert his eyes from the ugly fact of this overwhelming passion for the misfortunes of others. Obstinate he refused to believe it, telling himself that it was nothing but an excess of friendly solicitude.

Nevertheless, this evening his joy was too great, his anxiety almost choked him; the fear lest there should be no secret to pry into after all. Do what he would he could not altogether hide the shame of this longing which gripped him by the throat which showed so plainly, though he himself did not realize it in every feature of his lined yet childish face—so much so that

Marcel, watching him closely, experienced, in place of the usual half amused contempt which he felt for his one time friend, a sudden access of fear. He had the impression that he was taking part in a game which in some obscure way was dangerous. Presently, however, he continued:

"Tota has gone to meet someone."

The effect of this information on Hervé was such and so alarming the eagerness expressed in his face that Marcel, shaken, hastened to add:

"Don't get excited; she has gone to meet her brother who arrives by the midnight train."

Hervé sighed, smiled, and then said scoldingly:

"But I never knew that Tota had a brother. . . . What do I know about her, after all," he added, "except that she is beautiful and that you have married her?"

"You're wrong in saying she is beautiful," interrupted Marcel, who had now recovered his attitude of easy mockery towards Hervé. "You have never seen her mouth. Look at the photographs. It's a real muzzle; just what I adore."

Hervé did not so much as blink an eyelid.

"Is it?" he said. "But you, you have never loved the same person for more than four months at a stretch. . . ."

"Surprising, isn't it? And you, who went about telling everybody that this wouldn't last three weeks. . . . No, you needn't protest. You know perfectly well that everything gets repeated here and that you can't mention a thing about me that isn't passed on the very next day at latest. To say that my marriage would not last, that was nothing. You had a perfect right to say it and I dare say people were right to listen to you. I realize that it must seem to be in the nature of a miracle, but maybe I can explain it: here at last is a woman who does not cringe, who refuses to lose her own identity; who stands up to one, who puts up a fight, who . . ."

Seeing those childlike eyes fixed upon him from a face which was tense and set with curiosity, he stopped. What need was there after all to speak of her? Far better to hold one's tongue in the presence of this friend of whom every instinct bade him beware. Yet, as if unable to prevent himself, he blurted out:

"I'm happy; and that in its way is a remarkable thing for anyone to be able to say."

Like any man who is unwise enough to make such a statement Marcel knew that he lied:

"Touch wood!" he said. "Will you smoke? I've only got 'caporals': no, of course not . . . I might have known after all this time . . ."

"Happiness . . ." repeated Hervé.

He stared with unfeigned astonishment at a man who said he was happy. He grasped a large hand which Marcel made no effort to withdraw. Being on the point of abandoning himself to his overmastering passion he felt need of a tenderer emotion to smooth the way. It mattered not at all that for the moment Blénauge was sincere in his friendship. Marcel himself wished to regard him as trustworthy. And in truth at this moment he was; his handclasp, his attentive and earnest look, his very attitude as he leaned forward, everything about him encouraged and even compelled his companion to indulge in that inclination to talk about himself that so urgently besets every human creature. We only listen to what other people say in order that we may subsequently obtain a hearing for ourselves. But in the case of such persons as Hervé, and in such cases alone, is this concentrated attention perfectly genuine. They know only too well that this power of attention is their one asset without which they would scarcely be tolerated.

Hervé remarked how nice it was that they could see each other again and chat together like old times.

"But," he began, "what I don't understand is why you did

not go with her to the station; why you let her go out alone in the middle of the night."

This time not a trace of misplaced curiosity betrayed him. Marcel, having drawn up the blind, was peering out of the window, his forehead against the glass:

"I think it's raining," he said. "They may not find it easy to get a taxi. Yes, I ought not to have let her go alone. But I promised."

"Promised?"

Marcel came back from the window and sat down again at the table, while Hervé, avoiding his eyes, spoke in a tone of deliberate detachment as if his thoughts were elsewhere. But beneath the surface of that apparently calm exterior was in progress a desperate struggle to hold back that awakening instinct which in its warnings was so seldom mistaken—as if, by an immense effort, he held in invisible leash a baying pack straining to be on the trail of some unknown misfortune. However, he did not have to open his mouth. Marcel continued:

"I know it sounds ridiculous, but I promised Tota to keep out of the way while her brother was here."

"So it was she that didn't want you to go to the station with her? Ah! Then I understand. You and your brother-in-law don't get on?"

"Not at all; we get on splendidly. In fact it was he who persuaded Tota to accept my proposal. I'm under no illusion on that score; had he not consented . . ."

He did not notice the smile on Hervé's lips.

"How very odd. It was your future brother-in-law who signified his approval of the match? But what about your parents-in-law?"

Marcel replied that that was another story, and a complicated one. One of these days Hervé must hear it. To which Blénauge, with his most engaging air, replied that surely so much at least

was due to him on account of their old friendship. Beyond the circle of light cast by the lamp his shadowed form was as motionless on the divan as that of a bird-catcher on his bench. Confidences were in the air; were coming closer. Surreptitiously Hervé watched Marcel rolling a cigarette. He appeared to hesitate, saying that he did not know where to begin.

"In August, in a hotel at Cauterets?" Thus much of prompting did Hervé risk in the tone of a child who already knows the beginning of a story. So little did Alain and Tota resemble each other, said Marcel, that it still amazed him that he should never even for a moment have doubted that they were brother and sister. The simplest way of getting at Tota was by making up to her brother. This Marcel did from the first. He was lucky enough to succeed in pleasing this country youth. . . .

"It is only fair to say," sighed Hervé, "that you have never made a habit of pleasing people; each time you do succeed it comes to you as a surprise."

But Marcel protested that this time it really was a miracle. Could Hervé, for instance, imagine what the atmosphere of this place in Entre-deux-mers, in the depth of the Gironde, where Tota and Alain Forcas had been born and had lived all their lives, was like? This would give him an idea: their father would never agree to facing up to the expense of a season at Cauterets, even although on account of their health he had been urged by the doctor to do so. The only thing that had forced his hand in the end was a paralytic stroke whereby he was rendered helpless and subject to his wife's direction. It was moreover to this fortunate attack that the children owed the opportunity of completing their studies at the University of Bordeaux. Up to that time the village schoolmaster had been their only teacher; he, as it happened, had been a well educated man, relegated to this backwater on account of his communistic leanings. Ever since the father's stroke the mother who, up till then

could hardly call her soul her own, had begun to pluck up courage . . .

"But I'm boring you, old boy, with these tales of country life?"

Hervé assured him that while, admittedly, he found them boring to read, he liked them in real life.

"You were saying that your mother-in-law . . ."

Marcel had only spoken to her once, but she had made a profound impression upon him; a power of resistance she had such as one finds only in the women of such families. For years she had submitted and yet always held her own. Her tyrannous husband hated her only slightly less than he hated his children. . . .

"But come, my dear Marcel, one does not hate one's own children!"

"You believe that a father always loves his children? But even the mother . . . Why, I had a pal in my regiment whose mother loathed him because he was such a miserable specimen; she was ashamed of him. I remember that she used to make up to me, never imagining for an instant that I could possibly be a friend of her son's. She was convinced that I came because of her . . ."

"But it's easy to explain, Marcel, for you have always had the gift of being able to attract the outlandish. . . . Why are you smiling?"

"It only strikes me as rather comic that you should say that."

But no sooner had he said it than Marcel regretted having done so. He caught sight of a fleeting expression in Hervé's face which he recognised only too surely and which evoked in him a feeling at once of pity and of fear and he hastened to distract his attention:

"At any rate in father Forcas's case this dislike is understandable

for he is one of those men for whom the family, that is—father, mother, sister, brother—is their whole life. Their own children in their eyes are strangers because they belong to her who is herself the stranger in the family, the enemy within the gates—the wife. The children, in the struggle which follows, usually take the side of the mother. Thus the Forcas children, as soon as they were old enough to realize what was going on around them, backed up their mother, while old Forcas on the other side, with his sister . . .”

“Married?”

“No, an old maid, but having had a child by someone or other, no one quite knows who. It’s grown up now, anyway, and is, I believe, a naval surgeon or something. . . . But you can imagine what a deal of hard thinking was put in by that old man in his wheeled chair, wondering how he was to arrange so that his money should go to this outsider . . .”

“What a very odd story!” interrupted Hervé. “I never heard such a tale. And, I ask you, what sort of people are these? Weren’t you frightened? I would have been.”

Marcel, irritated, asked him what there was that did not scare him.

“You, my poor Hervé, are one of those who believe in the family with a capital F. The woman one marries is, for you, a family. You talk of marrying into a family. Now the story I am telling you is evidence to the exact contrary. Tota is my wife; her family, so far as I am concerned, might not exist at all.”

Hervé’s muttered: “You believe that?” passed unheard.

“Yes, they might not exist at all. I don’t give a damn for the lot of them, any more than I do for my own father, nor shall I ever set eyes on them again—except Alain, of course. I owe a good deal to Alain; Tota used not to be able to move without him. For you can picture these two children having lived, and suffered, all their childhood and in fact until they were grown

up, in that horrible hole. And when I say hole, it is the right word to use. I remember well the one interview I had with mother Forcas before I married. It was understood that so far as the old man was concerned she was supposed to know nothing; officially Tota was flouting the expressed wishes of her mother, who pretended to share the paternal rage. That will explain why this interview was to be of so frightfully secret a nature. Alain gave me beforehand the most careful directions to enable me to find the house. Moreover I could not, in the circumstances, venture upon any independent enquiries even had there been anyone to ask, for the villages, in the autumn twilight, were as deserted to all appearances as were the roads. Like most of the old houses in that countryside La Hume does not stand upon a hill but on the contrary in a hollow, sheltered from the winds and close to water. For ages I wandered about, waking up infuriated watchdogs, and, although of course I did not know it, circling round and round the little valley in which La Hume lay. Occasionally in the gleam of some passing headlights, I would try to make out a name on a signpost. At last, however, at the gate of an avenue I was hailed by Alain. From behind a half-ruined gate-post a figure appeared. I had scarcely time to catch a glimpse of a woman wrapped up in a shawl whose face was hidden by one of those huge gardening hats decorated with swallows, such as one still comes across sometimes in country house cupboards, when she was back again in the shadows. I took a few steps towards this phantom. She assured me over and over again that she trusted me, and spoke of her husband. 'No doubt,' she said, 'we could beard him, for he is very ill and would be at our mercy; but just because he is so ill . . . Already Tota's letter announcing her engagement has brought about a crisis. For two days he has been hanging between life and death.' And then, as I hastened to assure her that she could see Tota whenever she liked, she said: 'No. As long as he is alive (and that

can't be for very long) I had better not see her. And, of course, I have never seen you,' she added with an odd expression of distrust. 'You will be sure to say to anyone who may ask you that you do not know me? Even though we live lives of complete isolation yet my husband gets to hear of much that goes on through his sister.' You can't think how strange was the effect of the woman's sudden accesses of effrontery and terror. . . ."

Marcel checked himself, looked at Hervé, seated on the very edge of the divan so as not to crumple the sheets, and asked him what he thought of his story.

"I thought," he said, "that you would have reacted differently—you who, as a rule, are so easily astonished . . ."

"It is not your story which astonishes me so much as your way of telling it. Indeed," Hervé added, in his seemingly innocent way, "I should have said that once upon a time you would rather have found something to laugh at in all that. You would never have treated these people so seriously. . . . With the exception of course of your wife and brother-in-law. I quite understand that you like this Alain who, as I take it, was in some sort responsible for giving you his sister. But how was it that he put up with all that he did for so long, until he was twenty . . .?"

"Because of his mother and his sister, of course. Of his sister especially."

He was annoyed by the way Hervé looked at him and said no more. Hervé, nodding his head, muttered as if to himself:

"Oh, quite. Yes, now I see why they were so delighted to see each other this evening. Yes, yes. You are right; families are interesting; for, you see, your wife and Alain take after their father, evidently . . ."

Marcel threw him a questioning glance. Hervé, with an air of detachment, remarked that if he had understood aright old man Forcas also had a sister whom he liked better than anyone else. Marcel replied, dryly, that he failed to see what that had

to do with it, then after a pause he added that old Forcas's hate was directed primarily against his wife and children; his sister was merely instrumental in giving point to it.

"Then you are perfectly right: there is no connection whatever."

Marcel followed the fox-like twistings and turnings of Hervé's mind with profound misgiving. He longed for him to go, regretted now that he had told him so much, and wondered what the nature of the prey would be that he would carry back to his den. Half-way to the window he turned suddenly and saw Hervé smiling to himself with that particularly irritating expression on his face which he occasionally assumed. His smile had the appearance of being addressed to no one in particular, like that of an infant half asleep smiling to the angels. Perhaps it was this infantile cast of countenance which was the most repulsive thing of all about this man of forty. His lips were moving, and he gave the impression of one who is about to say something but is restrained from doing so by fear. His very eyes were sparkling; it seemed as if he could not very much longer hold his peace, like a hound which nothing in the world can silence once it gives tongue to a scent. Whatever it was that he was going to say let him say it quickly.

"What's the joke, for God's sake?"

"I don't really know what to say, except that there's no denying that they're a queer lot in the country. I always suspected that Paris's reputation was a borrowed one. We are poor fish here, when all is said. All these nights out when nothing ever happens, when we meet together to wait until cockcrow for something which never comes along. . . . But in the country—ha, ha—that's a different matter; they're up to something more than merely inventing cookery recipes, I'll bet . . . What are you looking at me like that for, Marcel?"

He got up, with his eyes still fixed upon Marcel's face. There

was nothing that Hervé feared more than the calculated anger of another man. And even while feeling frightened he was conscious of observing at close quarters one of the mysteries of love which to him was a neverfailing source of interest—the calling up by a lover of every available force at the slightest hint of an aspersion, by word or deed, against the beloved.

“But what was it that you thought? I didn’t mean . . .”

“Oh, never mind. But hop it now, they will be arriving any minute.”

“Listen, Marcel, let me just stay here till they come; I won’t even sit down; and I’ll only stay long enough to be introduced.”

He felt ashamed of himself for grovelling in this way. There was something vaguely shocking in the uncovering of this devouring curiosity, like the display of a disfiguring wound. Marcel, however, pushed him gently towards the door. Hervé, half laughingly, protested:

“It isn’t fair to tell people such interesting tales if you are not going to allow them to meet the chief actors in person afterwards. . . .”

And suddenly he said:

“After all, what harm can there be in my seeing them now that you have told me everything?”

Marcel, closing the door again, turned and placed his two hands on Hervé’s shoulders, gripping him:

“I’ve told you everything, you say? What have I told you? Come on, answer me, look me in the eyes.”

Hervé wriggled himself free.

“Clumsy brute,” he said, petulantly.

Marcel pulled himself together, said that he hoped he had not hurt him, and added:

“Let us part as friends; but all the same kindly remember this: I don’t know what you are going to amuse yourself by inventing

about anything I may have told you this evening, but make no mistake, I shall hold you responsible for the least bit of gossip . . .”

He stopped, noticing that Hervé had turned his attention from what he was saying to something new—the sound of the lift and of a key in the door.

“Too late. I shall see them after all!” cried Hervé in a voice of triumph.

Marcel barely had time to whisper: “Now, be off!” when politeness obliged him to introduce his friend to Tota and the young man who accompanied her. Propelled then irresistibly towards the door, Hervé was only able to obtain a glance at the couple—but what a glance!—comprehensive and avid, as from some strange being whose only means of existence was through his eyes. And so, with an air of satisfaction, he departed.

“So that was your Hervé, was it?” said the young woman when he had left the room. “I think he looks rather nice. Doesn’t it make you laugh to see Alain in Paris?”

Marcel looked at the shy young man, who was smiling but whose face, with its freckled nose and low, somewhat scowling, forehead, like the front of a young buffalo, did not give an impression of smiling. He seemed to be possessed of that same natural gravity that one sees in animals. He had a long body which made him appear to be shorter than he really was. Presently, as his sister removed her hat, he said:

“Hallo; you have cut your hair.”

He had a slightly sing-song voice and had the same slightly odd way of pronouncing some words that Tota had. While both had the same blue-grey eyes they differed wholly in the formation of the lower part of their faces. Alain’s thin mouth and pure line of chin and jaw had nothing in common with the “muzzle” to which Marcel had referred, and which in Tota gave grounds for other women to remark that she would not keep

her youthful looks for long. Alain took off his overcoat, revealing a suit which from being too short in the sleeves gave him the appearance of a schoolboy who has not yet finished growing.

"I was able to come," he said, in reply to a question put by Marcel, "because my father is much worse."

The air of astonishment which came over her husband at this remark made Tota laugh (she laughed too noisily and was apt to make too many gestures with her hands).

"Do look at him, Alain! Of course he can't understand. You must explain . . . No!" she said suddenly to Marcel; "don't sit down there; it is no longer a divan, it's Alain's bed."

What woman had ever before addressed him in such a tone!

"Go on; explain it to him, Alain."

"Father now is hardly able to move. His paralysis is getting worse and he cannot even leave his chair without help. So that Mother is no longer in any danger from him and can be safely left alone with him."

Alain spoke in an expressionless voice as if what he was saying was the most ordinary thing in the world.

"It is not long," said Tota, "since he would leave his chair the minute Mamma had her back turned in order to destroy some paper or other of which there always seem to be a few lying about. One time he fell with his head in the fire, and when Mamma went to help him he almost strangled her, such was his strength . . ."

"Strangled her? For fear of falling again, I suppose?" put in Marcel.

At this suggestion Tota jeered and tried to catch Alain's eye, but he, rising to his feet, said brusquely:

"That's enough, Tota; after all, it is hardly a laughing matter."

The brother and sister, embarrassed by Marcel's silence, whose

mind was on Hervé, could think of nothing further to say. Marcel pictured to himself the unholy joy which Hervé would have manifested had he been present at that moment. Where was he now? What was he doing? What were the thoughts that were occupying his mind in the watches of the night?

III

HERVÉ on his return home that evening counted upon Irène being asleep. He noticed, however, that light was showing from beneath her door. In vain did he hold his breath and walk on tiptoe; she had heard him come in and called out in a weak voice:

"You're back already?"

She dropped the book which she was reading. He picked it up; it was the second volume of Andler on Nietzsche. She was smiling because it occurred to her that Hervé had perhaps returned unexpectedly on her account; was it not possible, or even probable, that he had been nervous about her? Nevertheless he showed no sign of asking her how she was. He walked backwards and forwards, putting the tips of his fingers together and rubbing his hands. What was the matter with him? What had he on his mind? She knew she only had to wait; he would always speak freely enough to her when he had no one else to talk to. It was, however, Irène herself who first broke the silence:

"Do you know, I found your mother here when I got in, waiting for me! She said she was nervous about my having gone out to the party this evening as she knew that I never allowed the maid to wait up. She had warmed the bed and filled my hot water bottle, and refused to leave, saying that she would sit up with me. I had to pretend to fall asleep. Although the rue

Las-Cases is close enough it worried me to think of her being out so late all by herself."

"I hope you were nice to her."

"Not nice enough," sighed Irène. "She gets so frightfully on my nerves! I can't help it . . . Oh yes, and she brought me these . . ." (Hervé seized the paper bag out of which he drew a handful of sweets which he stuffed into his mouth). "Nothing would induce her to take one herself on account of its being the first Friday of the month."

She repeated "the first Friday of the month," and gave a forced laugh.

"Well, what does it matter to you? It is unworthy of you, Irène."

"I agree, and I'm ashamed of myself, but I just couldn't stop myself asking her if she really thought she could give pleasure to the Creator of Heaven and Earth by depriving herself of chocolates. I'm afraid I hurt her feelings, poor soul, but I couldn't help it; it's so maddening. People have no right to be so idiotic. . . But you, Hervé, why are you back so early?"

"For the reason that I already gave you;—because I dropped in for a chat with Marcel."

He spoke with his head turned away, actually because he seldom looked at Irène when he spoke to her; she, however, put it down to the fact that he was probably lying.

"No, Hervé, please," she said gently; "you need not bother; you know I shan't believe you in any case; nor am I asking you . . ."

But suddenly he turned to her with that look of triumph on his face that she knew so well; the expression of a precocious schoolboy correcting a parent's mistake.

"You can telephone Marcel in the morning and ask him. He introduced me to his wife and his brother-in-law. Did you know that he had a brother-in-law?"

"My dear, I apologise . . ."

She felt at once ashamed and pleased at having wrongly suspected him. It was enough for her that even once her suspicions should prove to be unfounded, that she should immediately chide herself for judging him too hastily. "A far simpler sort of creature, after all, than I ever give him credit for being. I am inclined to make him out to myself as a sort of monster, but why? It is quite possible that he is even rather fond of me. . . ."

She would have liked him to have reproached her for having so wrongfully disbelieved him. But he talked of nothing but Tota, her delightful brother, her impossible family, the countryside in which they had been brought up.

"Yes," she interrupted drowsily, "Marcel told me . . ."

"What? And you never said a word?"

She excused herself by citing a promise which Marcel had extracted from her.

"Well, anyway," he retorted, "I know more than you do now."

He was walking backwards and forwards across the room, his overcoat wide open and an eager expression on his face. Her eyes followed him with fatigue and some anxiety.

"But, Hervé, there is surely nothing so out of the way in the story. I don't understand you. And for pity's sake can't you keep still for one minute!"

He sat down, but still his face expressed a profound inward enjoyment. It was an expression which Irène hated; a familiar expression, and one which not all her devotion could make her regard with anything but repugnance. If only he would go! So that she could once more think of him only as a spoilt and ailing little boy. If only he would go away and let her keep, unblurred by his presence, that image of him which came to her in the semi-unconsciousness of her drug-laden sleep. . . . He is speaking now . . . But about what? The pain is too acute for her to attempt to follow him. And in any case in such circumstances to follow him is as often as not to end up in some mire: where-

ever you see his thoughts wheeling, just as wherever you see crows turning and wheeling, there, you may be certain, is carrion of some sort. Except that crows never make a mistake, whereas he sometimes creates the disgusting object of which he is in so great need.

Suddenly she pulled herself up upon her pillows, at the same time smoothing her hair back from her forehead in a gesture which momentarily gave her an appearance of baldness.

"What was it you said to Marcel? I want to know."

With an effort he turned his wide-open eyes to her:

"But nothing, Irène, I assure you. I kept my thoughts to myself . . . No, thank you, that would have been a bit too thick . . ."

"Are you quite sure?"

She regarded him with a distrustful eye. How was one ever to know? Even when he was not lying he looked as if he was.

"But I only ask you! Can you see me mentioning such an awful thing to Marcel?"

"What awful thing?" she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders:

"No need to act the sweet innocent," he said. "Must I cross every t and dot every i?"

But she was no longer listening to him. It almost seemed as if the weight of her head was dragging her back. Her face was now almost completely hidden by the pillow rising by either cheek and Hervé could see little but her nose, thin and pointed, still appearing. He asked her if there was anything that she wanted.

"Only to sleep," she replied, in a whisper. "Only to sleep."

IV

THAT same evening, having turned out the light, Marcel lay on his back, wide awake, in the large double bed. Although there was a closed door and the space of the entrance hall between him and the studio he could hear the voices of his wife and her brother in conversation without being able to make out what they were saying. Tota had told him to go to bed, promising that she would join him in a few minutes after she had had a chat with Alain. And he had obeyed her. She apparently thought it quite natural that he should. How should she know that no other woman had ever had the face so to order his comings and goings?

What were they talking about? He got out of bed, set the door ajar and listened intently. It was of no use; even by straining his ear he could only hear a confused murmur, punctuated now and then by Tota's strident laugh. Perhaps by an effort of concentration he might have succeeded in catching a few words, but that he was unable to do so owing to the disturbing occurrence of one insistent thought: what had that fox Hervé taken away with him to his earth? how much did he know? what conclusions had he drawn?

"At least I never let on to him the real cause of my anxiety . . ." No, he had not even hinted to Hervé the extent to which the unexpected news of his brother-in-law's proposed visit had upset him. Hervé did not know that for weeks Tota had been restless and difficult, threatening him vaguely with this and with that, and that doubtless the only reason that Alain was here was that she had sent for him. Why? Marcel could not have pointed to any single moment as marking the beginning of the change in the relationship between himself and Tota. Maybe it was his treatment of her that had been at fault. He had not

perhaps paid sufficient attention to the difference of age between them: nearly eighteen years! "She thinks of me as an old man." The more experience a man has had of women, the more rudimentary is apt to be the idea that he forms of women in general. For not all women are the bond-slaves of pleasure. Often that innate modesty of theirs, at the very moment when a man may think that he has utterly destroyed it, has a way of coming back in strength and bringing in its wake a bitter vengeance.

And then there was the incident which had occurred just after they were married: those two letters from Marie Chavès from the inebriates' Home of which she was then an inmate. The first of these letters was that of a mad woman and Tota had attached no importance to it; but the second, a letter full of excuses in which the wretched woman asked Marcel's pardon for all the things she had said about him had all the appearance, although there had been no such intention on the part of the writer, of being a definite and even formidable accusation. "And yet, no; it isn't that. Tota is not herself sufficiently in love with me to worry her head about a one-time mistress. She is moreover, I think, too young and inexperienced to grasp the full implications of that money affair. In any case I did tell her that on a certain occasion Marie had lent me a hundred thousand francs and that I had paid her back. . . . If I did happen to increase the sum while it was in my possession, that after all is my business. . . . I remember now that Tota hardly listened to me while I was explaining the thing to her; it just didn't interest her. I wonder if the little savage had any idea of what the world thinks about that sort of thing? What else can there be?"

Now it was Alain's voice which was the louder; he seemed to be angry, to be protesting. What would Hervé think, if he were there? "I told Hervé nothing; but all the same he went off full of glee, taking with him, no doubt, enough dirt to bespatter me and all of us. I believe that I could without difficulty reconstruct

everything that passed through his head while I was talking to m . . . But enough of that."

What a strange being Tota was. All the other women he had known had had "pasts," but the love they had borne him had in some way enabled them to rid themselves of such burdens. They had, as it were, thrown all their private possessions, whether belonging to their past or present lives, into the new flame to be consumed. Foolish indeed so wholly to abandon themselves to the passion of the moment that they did not even bother to give thought to the future. But Tota on the other hand surrendered nothing: this girl, totally without experience of any sort, having come into Marcel's life, held herself free to go out of it again when and how she chose. And moreover, whereto she went he could not follow. Tota was not dependent upon him; and yet a woman is always dependent upon someone; upon whom then was she dependent? In the darkness Marcel almost imagined he could see Hervé's smirking face and hear him whisper: "Fool: don't you understand?"

He relit the lamp and, having got up, opened the door giving on to the hall and then getting back into bed lay, holding his breath. The voices sounded louder now but still it was not possible to distinguish the words. Nevertheless he thought he heard: ". . . able Tota." Then silence. He repeated ". . . able Tota" to himself. Hundred of adjectives had that termination. He thought of them all, and suffered.

"But, Tota," said Alain; "fancy your forgetting! Don't you remember that very hot July when Father, then still up and about, was on the eve of his first attack? How his fits of temper frightened us so that we feared for Mamma's safety and I went into Bordeaux one day to buy a revolver. You were about at the end of your tether. I can see you now, after lunch—how hot it was!—pacing up and down the garden: you wanted to run away. I hardly dare remind you now of what you said to me then

about how you proposed to earn your living . . . It was ghastly; I tried not to believe that you meant it. . . .”

She turned her angry little face to her brother and with a defiant air swore that it would have been better had he let her go then as she wished than to have married her off to the first comer:

“It could not have been worse, and it might have been more amusing.”

“Tota!”

She was both annoyed and yet touched by his scandalized air. For a man his modesty, she said, was ridiculous. Ah! if only he could live for a time here in Paris!

“But do you think,” he said, “that the countryfolk in our part . . .”

“And what of it? They’re about right, aren’t they?”

Alain was shocked, and hardly knew what to say. A robust hardy type—and yet what was the reason of this melancholy, as if he were only remotely connected with what was going on around him, a spectator merely? The young woman took advantage of his silence:

“You act the little innocent now, but that doesn’t alter the fact that at Cauterets it was quite a different story. Do you remember the advice you gave me? And in the end you succeeded in making me believe that I was in love with Marcel—a man of thirty-seven! You can congratulate yourself; for it was you that pushed me into marrying him.”

Suddenly she noticed on her brother’s face an expression that she recognised only too surely: it was the expression that he used always to put on as a child when he was going to cry. Drawing his head to her with both her hands she kissed him on the forehead, saying with mock severity:

“Baby!”

“Perhaps I was wrong,” he stammered, “but it seemed as if

this was a good opportunity. I want to tell you . . ." here he hesitated, and then continued: "but perhaps better not; you are too unkind; you would make fun of me."

"No; go on, and we'll see."

But he would not disclose his secret, and Tota, in revenge and mimicking her childhood's voice, threatened him as she had often done when they were children together:

"All right then; I won't tell you anything any more either."

But he did not answer, thinking of that which he felt he never would dare to tell Tota. It was one evening of that same terrible July. He had been on the whole less afraid of his father, whom, had it come to the point, he could have managed, then of his sister, so fiery and untamed in her instinctive reactions. He could picture it all again so vividly—the moonlit evening; Tota in a white dress at the far end of the garden, and the cries of the farmer's children playing on the road. All around the familiar circle of the hills seemed to shut him in; no way out at all. He walked across the parched grass as far as the umbrella-pine and there, before he even knew what he was doing—(ah, no! Tota must never know!)—he was on his knees, sobbing, while to his lips came words, tumultuous and incoherent words. . . . Not many days later, his father being by then reduced to impotence, came the journey to Cauterets, the meeting with Marcel Revaux, whose war poems he had admired, that whole chain of events which, although he had never admitted it even to himself, had seemed to come as a direct answer . . . Tota was right; he had been too trustful, foolishly so, and he had no answer to make to her accusations:

"You never made any enquiries. All we knew was that he had a father stuffed away somewhere, with whom he had fallen out; a shop-walker! His family had little enough to do with this marriage; it is just as if I had married a foundling. You had

heard of Marcel, you knew his name, and that, you thought, was quite sufficient; only too happy as long as you rid yourself of me."

"Yes," thought Alain; "I trusted, I believed . . ."

"If you had made even the most casual enquiries in Paris you would have heard some pretty tales about the lover of Marie Chavès. At the time when he first met her she was a good artist; her pictures sold well. It was he who ran her sales for her—and pocketed the proceeds; everyone here says so. They will also tell you that the reason why he is rich now since the franc has gone down is because he gambled on the Stock Exchange with her money. And that's not all: when he found that people were beginning to say that after all it had been a mistake to call him a genius, that he had run dry, what did he do but take to drugs. And not content with that he dragged Marie Chavès down with him whom nobody had ever accused of such a thing before. And as drugs cost money it was the poor woman who had to pay for them. Marcel himself always rather hated the whole business and very soon gave up taking them: but she, they say, is now in such a bad way that she is likely to die. . . ."

"But it's revolting. How can you bear hearing people say such awful things about your husband?"

"I tell you everyone knows it. Besides there is nothing awful about such a story here. It's easy to see that you are up from the country . . ."

"Tota, aren't you coming to bed? It's past one o'clock."

Marcel had silently opened the door and stood there enveloping brother and sister in a glance of marked displeasure. The whites of his eyes were yellowish from fatigue, and his bare feet were thrust into a pair of ancient red leather slippers. A hairy chest was visible through his unbuttoned pyjama top. A stray lock of hair fell across his lined forehead. His generally undressed appearance lent emphasis to the fact that he was badly in

need of a shave. Two heavily marked lines running from the nose downwards served to frame his half-opened mouth.

Tota coaxingly asked to be given a few more minutes: they had, she said, so much to say to each other; and she was not at all sleepy.

"A few more minutes? I am so tired I can hardly keep my eyes open."

When Marcel had left them, Alain felt nervous: suppose he should have heard what they had been saying!

"Well, and what then? Do you suppose he doesn't know what I think of him?"

"But what is it that you want, Tota? Are you thinking of leaving him?"

She nodded.

"And coming back to La Hume?"

"No; you wouldn't expect me to, would you?"

She had risen from her seat and was walking about the room.

"Sometimes I think," she said, "that when seen from a distance our life then seems almost enjoyable. There is a restfulness about you, Alain . . . And yet how can I say it? It's a funny thing to feel embarrassed at the thought of mentioning certain things before a boy of your age. . . . Well, I have certain likings at present, you see. Amusement, love, and so on."

Alain, who had remained seated, bent his head.

"Love?" he said.

"Yes," she replied, and there was a sensual inflection in her tone; "have you ever heard tell of it?"

He raised his head and regarded her curiously.

"Yes or no?" she insisted, accompanying her words with a forced laugh.

But he, still looking at her, made no reply. Tota blushed. Then after a long pause she said:

"Well, I'll go to him for this night at any rate. Have you

got all you want? The divan is, as a matter of fact, quite comfortable."

He rose and took her hand. If, after all, it were true that the things of which she accused her husband were of such common occurrence here, why then, even supposing him to be guilty of doing them, blame him any more than the rest?—

"Why not forgive him and use your influence to make him better?"

She appeared to reflect for a moment, and then shrugging her shoulders:

"But can't you understand! If I loved him none of these things would matter at all;—on the contrary, instead of disgusting me they might even give me pleasure. But I don't love him, so there it is. But look; I might as well tell you; there is a boy called William Turner whom you will see while you are here. He is twenty-five, and he adores me. And I am quite fond of him, —sometimes very fond. I can't pretend that it is a serious affair yet but he is certainly not the kind to let the grass grow under his feet. He is quite a different type from Marcel. . . . It's funny how difficult it is to call things by their proper names in front of you. At any rate, whatever William may have done or may do, I don't care; it only amuses me. The only thing that matters is that I should like him."

Alain said nothing. After a moment's silence, suddenly in a changed voice she said:

"You think I'm simply awful, don't you?"

"No, Tota."

"Do you still love me?"

He took her hands, and she, putting her head upon his shoulder, hid her face.

She got into bed beside Marcel who was lying on his right side and pretending to be asleep. He never moved until he was sure by the sound of her breathing that she was no longer awake.

He could not pluck up enough courage to say anything to her. It was better to wait till the morning; daylight would surely dissipate this nightmare. He had been wrong to accept Hervé's suggestions without protest. He had thought himself clever in facing them, in giving them shape and form in order, as he imagined, the more easily to overcome them. To begin with it had been a sort of hideous game to fill in the outlines of Hervé's insinuations. But at least it had been a game. But now it was so no longer. His imagination, which had always been active even from his earliest years, continued to conjure up pictures of a terrifying reality. While only too capable of calling up images in his mind he was quite incapable of laying them or escaping from them once they were there.

What would he not give to see signs of daylight coming through the curtains. To-morrow, whatever happened, he must see Hervé. Not that he wished him any harm; he only wanted to have a quiet chat with him in order to reassure himself that Hervé did not really believe those things himself, that he was only pretending to believe them, in fact that he also, after his own fashion, was merely playing a game. If only he could get Hervé alone he could, if not probe the mystery, at least prow! round about it and refer to it. But what an age to live through till then! And now he began to regret that he had let Tota go off to sleep. She had often told him that she hated being woken up. . . . Never mind. He would no longer struggle against this ridiculous obsession; after all why not give way to it since he would be rid of it for good and all to-morrow? It was almost as if he drew in his chair to a solid meal. He searched the recesses of his mind. First La Hume: only once had he seen it sleeping there in its sheltered hollow under the moon: the front hall; the drawing room, darkened by its shutters closed on account of the scorching heat . . . But wherefore the heat? The family, too; he could imagine them in the dead of winter crouching round the one

and only fire. He could hear the rain beating down on the withered vines, on the muddy paths, at that time of year when the lamp must be lit by four, so dark did the crowding trees around the house make it within, while from along the leaf-choked gutters the water dripped interminably. And yet a more appropriate setting for this drama was surely in the furnace of the summer heats, when man and beast are overborne, when neither in flesh nor spirit is there any strength left, when amid that universal prostration lust flourishes the more.

Marcel groaned, suddenly, like a child who has hurt itself. "God, what a fool I am. For it isn't true. I know quite well that it isn't. But does Hervé believe it? No, he only wants it to be true because he enjoys seeing misfortunes; he would like to see a world composed of nothing but misfortunes in order that he himself might escape notice. In any case he possesses no real data to go upon. He knows nothing of La Hume or its inhabitants apart from what I have told him." Marcel longed to telephone to him, to speak to him.

He raised himself up on one elbow on the pillow: "Why can Alain have come? Why did she make him come? That is the real question. I get all worked up over something which has no basis of reality and quite forget what is the main difficulty—Alain's visit." Tota would be annoyed no doubt but it couldn't be helped, he must question her without further delay, now, this very minute.

"Tota!"

She was sure to be annoyed but he would say that she had wakened up by herself, that she had only heard him calling her in her dreams. She turned over on to her other side and slept on. He felt disappointed but also relieved, for to have broken into Tota's repose in order to demand explanations of her was something which in his mind assumed very grave proportions indeed.

V

THE next morning on entering his wife's bedroom Hervé was struck by the wax-like pallor of her face as she lay back unmoving among her pillows. She greeted him only by a lifeless smile which displayed her gums. He asked her whether she felt any worse:

"No worse", she replied. "I shall get back to bed after I have had my bath. Romieu is to come and examine me at eleven."

Nevertheless Hervé retorted with asperity that he could see quite well that she was worse. Why, he thought, this mania for concealing the facts?

"You can't possibly deceive anyone, you know. I'm afraid there is a little touch of vanity, my dear, about your stoicism."

She watched him without saying a word, the same pitiful smile on her lips. How young he looked this morning! Terribly young!

"I like your overcoat; but isn't it a bit light? Spring isn't here yet."

And with her thin fingers she felt the stuff. He assured her that he would not be cold, the more so since as it was so fine a morning he was going for a walk. It was so sunny too; it would be delicious. He would go and see his mother and from there would go on to Fouquet's where he was going to lunch with Marcel.

"Yes, it was Marcel who telephoned to me just now; he insisted on my lunching with him. We are inseparables now," he said in a tone of the utmost complacency. "He wants to talk over our conversation of last night."

"And after lunch, Hervé?"

Would he not come back and hear what Romieu had to say? He replied that he would speak to the doctor on the telephone later in the evening. He was engaged all afternoon . . . How well Irène knew that particular inflection, that tone of assumed indifference which always gave him away. Even without seeing him, merely by the sound of his voice, would she have known that he intended to devote the day to pleasure, to his own pleasure.

"Besides," he added. "Romieu! Personally I have far more confidence in Terral. If only we had taken his advice when he wanted to send you to Leysin for a year."

He was annoyed with Romieu for not thinking such a step necessary. For how satisfactory it would have been to have known that Irène was in good hands in a sanatorium. He himself of course would have remained in Paris. . . .

"Romieu swears that I have not got consumption," said Irène, quickly.

He taxed her with being afraid of the word. Terral on the contrary said that she had. And, after all, so much the better, for consumption at least was a known disease and was curable.

"You mean that Romieu's diagnosis is the more alarming of the two?"

But he vigorously denied the imputation of any such meaning. The fact was that Romieu did not know what was the matter with her; he was that type of doctor who liked to give the impression that he did not think much of medicine as a science.

"All the same," she retorted, "I know perfectly well what he thinks about me."

Hervé ought now to have pretended not to understand, but his clumsiness was painful.

"You know as well as I do," he said, "that the X-ray examination showed nothing."

She shook her head, saying only as if to herself:

"That means nothing at all if it is a malignant tumour . . . but let us change the subject, for in any case it doesn't matter."

He did not know what to reply. She lay motionless, her eyes fixed on the ceiling. He moved to the window. He could hear a dove cooing though he could not see it and imagined that it must be perched on the chimney-pot of the room itself.

"You might tell your mother that I shall be glad to see her to-day."

Anxiously he turned to look at her. The expression of such a wish was proof positive that she must be feeling worse, for as a rule nothing tended to upset her more than a visit from her mother-in-law. Fear seized him—fear lest he should not be able to go out after all. Just his luck! she was going to insist at the last minute on his staying by her; she was going to spoil everything. Irène, for all that she thought she knew him so well, misinterpreted the reason for his anxious look and gave him a compassionate smile;—after all, she thought, he does care a little.

"It's all right, my sweet; I only want to ask a favour of your mother . . . No, I can't tell you what it is. . . ."

He made no attempt to insist. That morbid inquisitiveness which as a rule strove so desperately after the secrets of others became quite harmless when it was merely a question of his wife. Nothing that concerned her appeared to interest him in the least.

"On second thoughts," she said presently, "you need not say anything to your mother about coming: I would rather be alone."

Irène was worried regarding certain poor persons whom, having originally helped at the dispensary where she sometimes worked, she continued generally to care for. Fearing now lest she become a prisoner in the house she had thought for a moment of handing them over to the care of her mother-in-law. But she had already thought better of it; the old lady might think perhaps that she was doing it in order to make a good impression.

"Moreover," she thought, "am I quite sure that my motive is not a latent desire to show her that charitable works are not confined to any particular sect?" And then, noticing that Hervé had already left the room, she called after him:

"Remember, don't let your mother put herself out on my account."

Hervé walked quickly, rejoicing in every step that carried him away from home and from Irène. Although he was delighted at the thought of meeting Marcel at lunch he realized that the only reason the latter had in asking him was in order to hark back to last night's confidences, a prospect which did not greatly interest him. And then the thought of how he was to spend the afternoon completely overshadowed all else. Nothing else really counted except that one thing; that was happiness and that alone was worth living for.

Every time that he pulled-to the gates of the lift in the house in which his mother lived, rue Las-Cases, he was reminded of that June evening when on coming home from school he noticed on the floor of the lift certain dark stains, the door of the flat wide open, the entrance hall full of people and his father's dead body laid out on the chest containing the firewood. The concierge and the servants had just brought him up from the court-yard below. A policeman was taking down notes in a pocketbook. His mother was still wearing a straw hat ornamented with primroses. So far was Hervé from shunning the contemplation of this picture that he was as often as not in the habit of dwelling upon it. Just as a criminal will, in order to avoid suspicion, create an alibi or accuse his accomplices, so did he throw the blame for all that he felt to be worst in himself upon this father of his who had committed suicide. It comforted him to think that he was not alone responsible for whatever was tainted in his own blood. The stream had been already polluted before ever he was born. He was only the passive channel where through

that muddy water flowed. At least in himself it would come to an end; he had no child; in him the impure river, fed by the scourings of several generations, would finally disappear into the ground.

No sooner did Hervé enter his mother's room than a complete change came over him; his voice, his expression, his very personality all became quite different. In order to penetrate into this kingdom he resumed his childhood. To-day, as happened each time he came to see her, his mother got up from her prie-dieu, saying apologetically "that she had not quite finished saying her prayers." (Did she ever finish saying them?) She fussed about him, asking him whether he felt cold; she herself, she always asserted, was as warm as toast; she never could understand how people could live with central heating.

"Yes, yes; you are cold; I'll go and fetch a log."

"But ring the bell, mamma: you have got servants."

She was always afraid of disturbing them. Back she came with the log, said to Hervé: "You sit down there," pointing to the low chair, and then: "Now tell me all about what you have been doing." He spoke of their parties, the people they had met, the plays—all of which to the old lady bespoke a life, futile maybe, but innocent enough. And all the time he snuggled down in this rediscovered and refreshing shade. As from a great distance he glimpsed, lit by lurid and intermittent flashes, the strange and unknown acts, the secret and devious ways which were to be his that afternoon. And all that dire future, so near to fulfilment, seemed utterly unreal and something which did not concern him at all.

But it only required a mention of Irène's name to bring all that recreated work or childhood tumbling about his ears.

"How is she this morning? What did Romieu say? What? You are not going to be there when he comes? But, my son, what more likely; than that he should have things to say

which he can only tell you, which he may not wish Irène to know . . . ?”

Once more he was a figure of guilt; one who invents excuses, explains, conceals, covers up his tracks. He wrapped himself in a cloak of lies, and his mother accepted the fact that even so futile a way of life as this had its own strange and burdensome duties. What man had ever been so tied by his office, his business affairs, his intellectual labours as was Hervé, the completely free man, by Heaven alone knew what:

“You will go back after lunch and see her, won’t you?”

He hoped so. . . . He would try. . . . He could not say for certain.

The old lady continued her knitting without looking in his direction. Suddenly she said:

“I shall go.”

He assured her that Irène would rather sleep than talk. Only yesterday she had said to him: To turn my face to the wall and sleep, that’s all I want.

“She said that? You are sure? But it’s terrible, that!”

Madame de Blénauge held her hands, worn hands with prominent veins, up to her eyes.

“I cannot any longer hold back merely from fear of irritating her,” she said; “it is a question of looking after her, don’t you understand? Don’t pretend not to understand, my son.”

Hervé glanced at her nervously. She had not raised her voice nor had her eyes left the knitting which she still held, nodding her head with each movement of the needles. A lace mantle covered the baldness of her head, leaving visible two bandeaux of yellowish white hair. Upon her bodice, which buttoned up the front, hung a gold cross.

“You must be quick over your luncheon, my pet, and join Irène afterwards.”

“Yes, mamma.”

"Yes-yes or yes-no?" she asked as if he were still at the age of ten.

He promised to do his best and she understood quite clearly that he would not return home before evening. He sat with his face turned away from her. Nothing could prevent him from doing this afternoon what he intended to do, from savouring to the full his sorry delight, from plunging into surroundings which could not even be imagined by this elderly woman in front of him. He could see so plainly the streets through which his taxi would pass, this boulevard, that square, the house standing back from the road, the court-yard, the door on the ground floor, the keyhole of which it was always so troublesome to find in the dark, the stair, the room on the first floor.

His mother looked at him with those eyes which were so pure, so childlike in her tired face, and blue as were his own which he had inherited from her. Hervé thought of all that he had seen and would see with his eyes which were so like his mother's.

He repeated: "I'll do all I can," knowing full well that his mother did not believe him. She watched him from the landing. After he had gone down one floor he looked up and saw her leaning over the banisters. She watched him going down, fading from her sight, till he disappeared altogether.

VI

THE old lady did not fail once more to exasperate her servants that morning by affecting to be unable to touch anything of what she affirmed was a far too lavish lunch.

By three o'clock she was on her daughter-in-law's doorstep, and in spite of the fact that she was told that, following a crisis,

the latter had at last succeeded in getting off to sleep, she insisted on going up to see her, merely as she said, to find out how madame was looking. The indignation of the cook at such behaviour knew no bounds; how people could force their way in where they were not wanted in that way, she said, she didn't know.

Through the drawn curtains a single ray of sunlight penetrated the room and revealed the littered table. The bed, wherein the sick woman lay on her left side, was in semi-darkness. The little old lady made no more sound in her movements than a mouse. She stood waiting for a moment until her eyes should become accustomed to the grey light and then went and leaned over the bed. Irène was breathing rapidly and there was a flush on her cheeks. A fever, perhaps? Which, Terral said, was a sign of tuberculosis. Cancer is not usually accompanied by fever; and besides, cancer at the age of thirty-four! But according to Romieu certain kinds of tumour affect the liver and thereby provoke high temperatures. She was sound asleep and her mother-in-law was able to contemplate her at leisure, while she clasped her hands in prayer above the poor ravaged body. By the bedside was a glass half filled with water and an open tube of soporific cachets. The old lady picked it up and noticed that two of the cachets were missing. She slipped the tube into her bag. It was then that her eye was caught by a half-open drawer in the table in which she could see a number of similar tubes, all as yet unopened. Swiftly and guiltily she took them one by one. The snap made by the bag as it shut caused Irène to turn over in the bed muttering confusedly. Madame de Blénauge stood, holding her breath, as if turned to stone. Everything was still and silent in the empty flat. She thought of children's footsteps along the passage, of the sound of a child's laughter . . . She bent her head. What had she still to expect of life? How could she ever cease to care for the only two things that remained—her sorrow

and her love. At least there was nothing now to distract her attention from either. Blessed is old age which removes all obstacles which stand between the soul and God! All that is of the world dissolves; silence and solitude are the forerunners of death. Old age itself is but a foretaste of the tomb. What I suffer after all, she thought, is not enough; it amounts to so very little; and her husband, Hervé, Irène, all these poor souls that were her care; and all she could compass was an act of such pitiful futility as this pilfering of some cachets from a drawer.

But what if Irène should wake up, should see her there! . . . She left the room, tiptoeing out and not drawing breath until she was on the landing where she had to hold fast to the banisters to assist herself as she went down the stairs.

Once in the street she walked slowly, not daring to take a taxi for she was short-sighted and never could make out the figures on the clock with the result that she was apt to give an inadequate tip and thus lay herself open to ill-mannered abuse. She also, like Hervé, saw in her imagination a street, a court-yard, a house standing back from the road, a door. She walked along the rue de Babylone; thank heaven, she thought, I have not much further to go; I think I shall remain seated in my chair, not kneel . . . Turning into an outer door, she crossed the silent court-yard and went up a few steps. It was time: she knew herself at the feet of her love and already felt her strength return; to Him in outstretched arms she offered this son and daughter-in-law of hers—so unhappy a son and so blind a daughter. And from them a moment her busy spirit turned to the contemplation of the dead, bending lovingly over him whom the servants had found lying in the court-yard at the point of death—(the envelope containing his last wishes remaining pinned to his pyjamas); those eyes already veiled in shadows were fixed on her but could not see, that blood-stained head reposing for the last time upon her faithful shoulder. Little by little, try as she would to hold them, her intentions

slipped from her consciousness until at length she was aware of no one, either of the living or the dead, but of One alone upwards to Whom her eyes were lifted in the darkness.

VII

MARCEL insisted upon Hervé having a glass of brandy: he felt an unwillingness to leave the warm shelter of this restaurant which had the effect of deadening the agony from which his mind was suffering. But Hervé had business on hand; he was pressed for time, he had an appointment.

"Before you go tell me what you meant just now when you said of Alain that he looked like a man who is obsessed with a single idea?"

"Just that and nothing more. What a curious fellow it is, to be sure."

"You swear that?"

"Swear what? It is merely a sort of impression that I got. That is all there is to say about it. But you know I must say you have altered a lot since your marriage. Well, I'm very sorry but I must fly; I've got someone waiting for me."

Marcel caught him by the arm:

"Why not join us at the Bœuf this evening? Alain will be there. Tota wants to take him there without telling him beforehand, for a joke, to see what he will think of it. You can talk to him a bit; I would like to know what sort of impression you get of him. I don't quite know why I should ask you to do this, but do come anyway."

No sooner had he made this request than he bitterly regretted having done so. But Hervé did not show the same joy at this prospect as he had done on the previous evening. In reality he

was no longer there, already he was living in and breathing the air within those four walls which presently would contain his happiness. As for Marcel he would put him aside somewhere in the meantime, hide him like a dog hides a bone; he knew well enough where to find him again when he wanted him. Certainly it would be amusing this evening to try to make Alain talk. But he was in no hurry for this evening; between now and then lay a whole eternity of pleasure. He was in any case less concerned to let his mind dwell upon the hours immediately following the fulfilment of his desire—a time, as he well knew, of gloom and disgust which it was not possible ever fully to realize before such fulfilment. For the moment that aspect of the question was in the background of his mind only: he knew that he would suffer, inevitably, but before then, endlessly, was his enjoyment. As the attendant was helping him on with his coat he could see by looking in a mirror that Marcel was gnawing at his fingers till he made them bleed.

Marcel had already missed an appointment at the Chamber and had omitted to order the sale of his Puerto Belgranos. He did not feel inclined to sit still and do nothing. Tota and Alain had gone off to visit the museums. What was he to do until they returned? Should he go to Saint-Cloud and spend the afternoon with Marie Chavès? That would occupy the time, and it would also be an act of charity. But it would of course be a re-entry into the world in which he had lived before he knew Tota, into a part of his life which was now so remote and unreal that the very thought of it was unpleasant. He might, however, talk to her about Tota. Then there was Irène; but Hervé had told him that she was at a critical stage of her illness and could not possibly see him. In any case she would probably bore him to death by talking about Nietzsche. And after all he himself was alive and well; he was not to be satisfied merely with words. She would be sure to want to pick up the threads of their romance which had come to an end

years ago. She could not grasp the fact that it was finished, done with; that he as a man was finished; that all that remained for him was to live—that is, as he understood living. He tried vainly to think of the name of a friend whom he might get hold of. The waiters were whipping off the last tablecloths. There was no help for it, he must leave and wander about Paris. And the old incentive would bring his footsteps to that half-opened door, would propel him slyly into that passage-way.

VIII

HERVE turned the key with the utmost care. But there was a light showing under Irène's door. As he had imagined, she was sitting up in bed, supported by cushions.

"I'm very sorry . . ."

"Why should you be? I don't wish to confine you permanently to the house. Surely I am not so exacting as all that!"

She spoke in a tone of unusual gentleness. Her hands were hidden beneath the sheet.

"Sit down here beside me a minute."

He obeyed her, kissing her upon the forehead as he did so.

"Did Romieu come? What did he say?"

"Only that I was slightly feverish, which surprised him. You don't look too well yourself, and as always your tie is crooked."

She pulled it straight with a movement which reminded Hervé of the first year of his marriage. Then in the same tone of voice she said point-blank:

"I have a bone to pick with you, my sweet."

He glanced at her quickly and nervously, although her voice was as he recalled it from long ago, firm but full of a cliding affection. As she spoke she shook a finger at him:

"You know quite well what I mean."

Dumbly he gave her to understand that he did not know.

"Sir," she said, "I fear that you are a thief."

He breathed again. He had no idea what the accusation meant but he saw that Irène was not serious.

"Cheer up!" she added; "I bear you no grudge; I shall only have to buy some more to-morrow."

"Buy some more what?"

"It's no good pretending to be innocent. But next time I shall take good care not to leave my provision in a drawer. I'll see that everything is under lock and key. Now don't look so sheepish please,—though I never would have suspected you of taking such thought for my well-being. No; although it was bad of you to have done it I appreciate it. But it was not very like you I must say;—I mean it wasn't very like your usual self."

She stopped, seeing his puzzled expression. Was it possible to act astonishment so well?

"Where have you put my gardenal?"

"Your gardenal?"

"Wasn't it you who removed the tubes from my drawer this afternoon?"

He protested that he had not been back the whole day, not even to dress, as he had dined in the clothes he stood in. She looked him slowly up and down, then after a pause muttered:

"I must be wandering."

She laughed.

"So stupid of me; I am sorry."

"But mamma promised me she would look in this afternoon. She must have come while you were asleep."

"Of course"—and again she laughed, "it was your dear mother. And I accusing this innocent all the time."

It seemed as if she could not stop laughing.

"Just think of it! I accused the poor fellow of breaking in

during my afternoon sleep and he has not even been back to change. All the same he has changed his collar somewhere. I don't recognise the soft collar you were wearing this morning."

"Oh, that! I borrowed it from Marcel."

"He can't have worn it often, unless he enjoys strangulation . . . I am in pretty good form this evening, don't you think? Where are you going?"

He said he was going to dress; Marcel was waiting for him at the Bœuf with Tota and the brother-in-law.

Alone once more Irène felt depressed and miserable. It only required the slightest of straws, she thought, to sail within reach and she would clutch at it. How soon would she reach the stage of giving up hope altogether? "He never came back for Romieu's visit; he never even telephoned." "If when one is dead," she whispered, "one could know that one was dead . . ." Then after a pause: "So it was that old fool who came and messed about in my drawer . . . The only one who pays any attention to me. And why? Because she doesn't want to have a daughter-in-law in hell . . . And yet, no, poor woman, she does care for me after her fashion; she believes that I've got a soul; she believes that there is someone who looks on at suffering, and in the folly of such beliefs she is happy. . . ."

In the next room Hervé was dressing. "Always deny!—not at all," he thought. "Better not to deny anything before one knows what one is accused of." And to think that he was supposed to be a liar! There never surely was anybody who was less capable than he of dissimulation. "If I had only played up to her, Irène would have softened towards me, the whole atmosphere would have become easier to breathe in. . . ." It was too early yet to go. He lay down on the bed. A bitter smile twisted his lips. But presently his mind was at rest, dreaming of his head laid peacefully upon a comforting shoulder—a sure sign with him of surfeit and of exhaustion.

IX

BRUSQUELY, Alain left the table and, pushing his way through the serried mass of dancers, reached the cloak-room and demanded his hat and coat. No other excuse for his behaviour was necessary than was plainly apparent on his face, for his cheeks were flushed and he felt the blood singing in his ears. Accustomed as he was to a life in the open air with his head bared to all weathers, here he felt suffocated and unable to breathe. Tota noticing her brother's flight left William and joined him. Why, she asked, was he running away like this? Because he was afraid, he replied, that if he stayed another minute he would suffocate:

"How on earth can you live in such a furnace?"

"Yes it's true, now I see your cheeks are as red as peonies."

And with a motherly gesture she placed her two hands one on either side of his face. Marcel was watching her from where he sat; at one gulp he swallowed his third whiskey and in his turn struggled through the crowd to where they stood.

"You are both mad," he said.

"Why?"

Tota whispered to Alain not to worry about what Marcel might say; three whiskies always affected him. And above all, she said, better not contradict him.

"Let's all go," growled Marcel.

Outside the night-club Alain refused to get into the car with the others. He said he preferred to make his way home on foot as he felt the need of fresh air, of plunging his heated face into the coldness of the night. Tota told him that he would find the key under the mat. As she was speaking Alain looked at her; fatigue added to the rouge with which she had been carelessly touching

up her face at intervals during the course of the evening gave her an appearance of age beyond her years. Her hands too looked dirty on account of the crimsoned finger nails, which had the appearance of having been dipped in blood,—not differing in this respect, however, from any other woman, all of whom seemed equally to be suffering from this disfigurement. The sight of them reminded Alain, however, of the same hands, sunburnt and bramble-scratched, as they had so often been held out to him in the old days.

He set off by himself at a rapid pace. The fog, in this street not far from the Place de la Concorde, had a smell which to this countryman was not familiar. Not even this, one of the world's greatest cities, could altogether quench, any more than it could disarrange the set order of the stars, the upspringing freshness of the earth, the scented woodland quality of the night. Carrying his head high he drew deep breaths of air into his lungs as he walked. Presently he heard behind him the rapid footsteps of someone running. It was Hervé de Blénauge.

"You are a fast walker. I only wanted to say that I have a car, and if you would care for a lift . . .?"

Alain thanked him but said that he preferred to walk. Hervé quite agreed that fresh air was desirable after the smoke-laden atmosphere of the Bœuf. Unfortunately he happened to have his car there, but if Alain would allow him he would love to accompany him for a short distance. Perhaps because he sensed the lack of response that this suggestion elicited, Hervé quickly added that after all he thought perhaps he had better not leave his car. Alain accordingly left him. Motionless on the pavement Hervé watched him go. It was incidents such as these, trivial in themselves, which hever failed to cause twinges of acute anguish; it was then he saw himself abandoned, despised, outcast. And no horror that he could ever imagine himself as inspiring in others could at such times equal the horror which he in himself inspired.

Alain had crossed the Champs Elysées and was now wandering among the deserted alleys not far from a bandstand encircled by a balustrade. All of a sudden he realized that he felt tired. In spite of the damp wind, which shook the branches in agitated patterns against the light of the arc lamps, he sat down on a bench. With an effort he brought his mind to bear upon Tota and the problem of her married life. She is quite right, he thought, I alone am responsible. And yet he felt ashamed at his own indifference; try as he would he was somehow unable to take his sister's complaints really seriously. It was not so much that he was indifferent as that he had a sense of astonishing security. I was wrong, he repeated to himself; I acted superstitiously as if I believed that everything had been preordained. Still at the back of it all there persisted that feeling of utter confidence; a feeling that he could let things be; that all would be well. For all that it is dreadful, he thought, and a smile came over his face, as he watched two stars appear where the fog was thinning, "It's a sad business," he said at length aloud. And even as he said it he felt his heart leap within him with an unknown joy. "It is youth; because I am young perhaps . . . Who can tell?"

A man sat down on the bench beside Alain. He was not a beggar but a gentleman apparently, middle aged, and wearing spectacles.

"Aren't you afraid of catching cold?"

The question was clearly addressed to Alain yet the speaker did not turn his face towards him. Alain got up and walked quickly away. Beneath the trees he no longer had the feeling of being alone, and he was on the point of leaving their treacherous shade when he was brought to a sudden standstill: yes, there could be no doubt that that was a groan he had heard coming from somewhere beyond those bushes. His first inclination was to run away but, blushing at his own timidity, he went round the clump. There on an iron chair, with her back against the shaft of a

lamp, was a woman seated upright with her head thrown back as if in the act of offering her throat to the knife. It was evident that she believed herself to be alone,—her attitude, the long-drawn sigh which escaped her at intervals, everything about her proclaimed a creature at bay, a person who no longer is constrained by the presence of others to keep up appearances, in fact someone shorn of all the pretences of every day, at grips and as it were petrified by an overmastering sorrow.

Round her neck was a fur which Alain knew to be valuable even though he did not know it for chinchilla. "She must be a lady," he thought, naively. He hesitated and then stepped towards her. She turned towards him a face of which in the shadow of her turned-down hat he could only make out a mouth with two strongly marked lines at the corners. That, together with the short nose, gave the impression of a face ravaged by some wasting disease. He asked her whether she was feeling ill.

"No; leave me alone, please. I don't want anything."

As he came close to her she looked at him with astonishment, her attention momentarily distracted from her own troubles.

"So young too;" she sighed. "You can't be more than twenty?"

"Nineteen, madame."

"Poor boy."

The woman's curiosity overcame all her other feelings. She it was who asked questions now while he was frankly puzzled. Was she perhaps drunk?

"May I be of any service, madame?"

"Well, yes, you may. Go and fetch me a taxi."

He asked her where the nearest taxi rank might be and when she told him Maxim's he asked her where that was. At first she thought he was joking but, having studied him afresh, she suddenly understood:

"You don't live in Paris?"

No, he said, he was actually in Paris for the first time and was at that moment looking for a taxi himself as he had lost his way. She seemed to be put out at this and murmured: "I apologise . . ." though he was at a loss to know for what she was apologising.

"I should have remembered that I am never deceived by faces," she said. "I might have summed you up by yours. Besides, from your accent you come from the Midi, don't you? . . . the Gironde? I could have sworn it. I know that accent well enough . . . only too well. . . ."

She rose to her feet.

"I shall try to walk a little. Would you accompany me as far as the rue Royale?"

They set off together in silence. Alain tried to think of something to say but could find nothing except to ask her what she was suffering from. She replied: "From someone" with emphasis. Whereat he turned his face, so innocently boyish in expression, towards her.

"That is no mere figure of speech," she added. "One can suffer from someone, one can have someone just as one may have cancer or any other complaint. It is the most physical of ills. Have you never yet suffered from it yourself?"

He shook his head. She looked at him.

"You are only a child," she said.

She stopped on the edge of the pavement just where the trees came to an end.

"Do you see that bench? Well, one evening last July we sat there together, he and I. Now it is all over."

She was silent, waiting for him to question her further; but as he said nothing she began again:

"I don't know why I should unburden myself like this. It is not at all like me to do so . . . But you have done me good." Then after glancing at him, she asked.

"Would you mind if I gave you my card?"

She groped about in her bag but failed to find what she was looking for.

"I shall tell you my name and address in any case on the chance of your remembering: Thérèse Desqueyroux, 11 bis, Quai d'Orléans."

"Ah; Desqueyroux! But that is a Girondin name," he said.

In his taxi Alain considered again in his mind's eye the woman's face, the mouth which seemed to have no lips, the too-short nose, —a ravaged face, hard and smooth in texture as a pebble. Always the same madness, this exhausting chase; always these men and these women hunting one another down. And what about him? Why not he himself too? It was after all rather dreadful to be so unlike others. Why should he feel different, odd man out, placed as it were on one side? What destiny awaited him? Who was it who required of him that at the age of twenty he should be an onlooker at this struggle rather than a wholehearted participator? "It's terrible," he said to himself, without conviction. Strange feeling of inward contentment and happiness! Burying his face in his hands he repeated: "What is the matter with me?" Shaking his head like a young bull that feels the goad, as one that rebels against an unknown yoke. La Hume, his father, his mother, Tota, Marcel, he retraced all the stages which led back to the sources of his torment till he had found the anguish that he was looking for: tears filled his eyes; life was indeed hard! But how was it that this life with all its troubles and miseries could not shake the peace that was in his heart, nor in any way disturb that trustfulness as of a little child that clasps lovingly the hand held out to it in the darkness?

X

ALAIN bent down to take the key from under the mat. But before he had time to raise himself the door opened and he saw Tota. She had removed the rouge from her face and he saw her as she had been in the days before she had ever known of such things, a little girl with a sunburnt complexion and anxiety in her eyes. Without giving him time to ask any question she said:

"A telegram from mamma: nothing serious. Look, you read it. She says herself: 'Nothing serious,' but she wants you to go back. It probably means that there has been an offer received for last season's crop."

They were standing in the entrance hall which was permeated with a stale smell of cooking. Alain still had his overcoat on and while he re-read the telegram Tota watched his face.

"What is that?" he asked.

A sound, regular in its rise and fall, of snoring was clearly audible.

"It's he, of course," she said in a venomous whisper. "He is always like that, especially when he has been drinking. Like an animal."

Alain asked for a time-table, but she protested vehemently.

"But you are not going to go? You know what mamma is . . . No, no; besides you promised you would stay a week. I shall write to her and tell her to send us an explanation. And if she says: Nothing serious, we are quite safe in believing her."

Alain preceded his sister into the studio where a single log was still burning in the fireplace. Tota's evening cloak was lying where she had thrown it on the divan. He picked up the time-table and she realized that she had lost.

"I don't think I'll go to bed," he said.

His thoughts were already far removed from his present surroundings—from this house, this city. "Nothing serious:" that might well mean that everything had gone wrong.

"Do you remember that evening when we went into mamma's room and she kept repeating: "It's nothing, it's nothing," and all the time there were bruises on her neck . . . I must go; I wish I were already there."

Tota reminded him that the sick man was now helpless, that a child could manage him without difficulty. But Alain seemed to think that he yet was capable of sudden accesses of strength. Moreover it needed but so slight a movement, for a weapon is always to be feared even in the hands of an invalid. His voice trembled and he fell silent, acutely conscious of the fact that what he was saying in no way corresponded to what he was really thinking. For such was not the reason for his desire to go. He longed to go and was making use of this as the first pretext to his hand.

"And what about me, Alain?"

"You?"

"Yes, me; what is to happen to me?"

He shrugged his shoulders with a smile:

"You don't believe me, then," she cried, her voice rising in anger, "when I tell you that this is serious and that I am through with it?"

No, he could not bring himself to believe that it was so serious.

"You say yourself that your husband is no worse than many another. Pull yourself together, then, and put up with it. You don't need me. And anyway you say you are unhappy, but who on earth is happy?"

"I told you before that there is someone else. I told you his name; and you saw me dancing with him all this evening."

With an effort he recalled the image of a youth with a sallow complexion, a somewhat clouded eye, a face thin and almost

ascetic in its air of debauchery, who kept on coming back to the table after every dance to empty his glass. Tota continued to speak of him but Alain was lost in thought. Did she really love this man? And what exactly did she understand by love? Then suddenly and irresistibly he saw that nothing of all this was of the slightest importance for him, that he had no part to play in this sorry game. A game of shadows, unreal, ghostly; he could not, did not, believe in its existence. Tota's hoarse voice, as she spoke of herself and her troubles, had no more power to move him than the cries of cats in June on the roof at home. Unmoved he watched her blowing her nose, wiping her eyes, heard her saying:

"I know all there is to be said against him—his weakness, his vices, that he takes drugs, but what of it? I dare say it is just that that attracts me,—a sort of wish to protect him—against others and against himself, to save him."

She lied quite sincerely. But Alain smiled at these pretexts which were every bit as fortuitous in their way as those which she used in her rage against Marcel. Truth to tell, young William inspired her actually with no more pity than did Marcel with hate: she was no more touched by the weakness of the one than shocked by the venal love-affairs of the other. She made use, quite impartially, of an attraction and an antipathy both of which were rooted in effect in the same purely animal instinct. No, certainly all this meant nothing at all. Only a word here and there of what Tota was saying penetrated his consciousness:

"But is William capable of loving anybody, you say? His friends say that he isn't. But I know that I could bring happiness back to him. Once he were really happy he would always be faithful. Perhaps I say that to reassure myself, for I wonder would anyone really have any chance of happiness with him?"

What was this happiness that Tota talked so much about? They all talk of happiness and they haven't the least idea of what it is. And all of a sudden, to this clear vision of things as they were

was added a desolating sense of loneliness, wherein Alain felt as if he alone grasped the essential nullity of that which was so troubling Tota's mind, and not only hers, but the minds of millions of other human beings as well. Far back within his own consciousness and, as it were, behind it, he watched the strange metamorphosis of that thing that men call life, saw it flickering, dwindling surely into obscurity.

"But you are not listening," said his sister; "you can think of nothing but mamma, La Hume . . ."

Again he gave her the various reasons which made it imperative for him to return home. But ever as he talked it dawned on him more and more clearly that had he not been recalled he would have left all these people any way as from the midst of a foolish play in which no rôle had been assigned to him. Tota was still weeping a little . . . She was hurt. At least there is something real about their suffering, these people. And yet . . . ! In a few months' time, or a few weeks' maybe, the essential insignificance of this wretched, drug-sodden youth will once more have become apparent to Tota. Alain felt ashamed of himself for not being able to feel more sympathetic. After all was he not fond of Tota? That certainly; fonder of her than of anyone in the world. But that somehow was not the real point, which was to be looked for elsewhere.

"Listen, my little one; I'm off. Because of mamma doubtless but also to some extent because of you and in order to think the whole thing over. I shall write to you, and if you shout for help I'll come back."

He was conscious of deliberately calming her down with vague promises, while at the same time he extracted from her a promise that she would take no decisive step without letting him know.

"But you won't go without giving me a kiss?"

"And what if you are asleep?"

She replied that she would not be asleep, that she rarely

did sleep now. They were passing through the minute dining room.

"There are some bananas and apples left over," said Tota. "Do you remember at La Hume how we used to get up after everyone else had gone to bed and have a 'secret' dinner?"

Yes, he remembered well. They would creep downstairs, feeling their way; their entry into the dining room would always disturb a large rat. Then after they had lit a candle, shivering in their long nightgowns the children would hunt out a biscuit, drink what remained of the milk . . . Alain looked at that same little girl, now finding relief from her sorrows in these reminiscences, who was saying with her mouth full:

"You ought always to eat apples without peeling them because the skin is full of vitamins."

He asked her teasingly what vitamins were, whereat having no idea, she burst out laughing:

"I can't help laughing though I don't feel like it at all."

Nevertheless her laughter reassured Alain. They were now back in the studio. On the divan the bed-clothes lay spread invitingly. Tota looked to see whether there were enough blankets. But he repeated that he would not get into bed; he would merely lie down. He kissed her and she replied in the words of their childhood's rhyme which she always used to say when making it up after he had made her cry:

"On cheek nor forehead do me kiss
But first on that eye then on this."

For a little space she remained silent, smiling up at him; then she said:

"You will never throw me off, Alain, will you, whatever I do?"

He shrugged his shoulders; how could he ever do so? But in a tone of authority he told her that she must not ever do that thing she was thinking of doing. Already she was gone; hardly had he

finished speaking before she was out of the room. Alain's eye roved over the illustrations cut out of sporting papers of football scrums and boxers stuck here and there on to the distempered walls with drawing pins; on the only table, consisting of a few planks resting upon two trestles. There was something essentially affected and false in this bare simplicity. He sat down and began to unlace his shoes. "I am lacking in true charity," he said to himself; "I am becoming self-centred and hard;" and a wave of emotion surged up in him at the thought, causing his heart to thump within his breast. What if all this posing and talk on Tota's part had only failed to move him because it was only remotely connected with what she was really endeavouring to express: "This love which has nothing to do with love; this life which has no life in it. But why go on repeating that? What does it all mean, anyway? . . . I am merely being a fool," he muttered. Somewhere a bell tolled. He did not know that it was the bell of the Benedictine church nearby. He knew nothing of the vitalizing flood which was now beginning to quicken in the veins of sleeping Paris. ("I will just shut my eyes," he said to himself. "I feel worn out.") It never occurred to him that Paris, the foaming surface alone of which he had seen, could be a holy city; nor that in this very dawn, now breaking so bleakly over many a suburban parish, were men and women rising and supporting, frail Atlases, upon uplifted arms, the city and the world.

"I am worn out," he repeated, as if to give the lie deliberately to the feeling which he had both in mind and body of extreme wakefulness. He was filled with a strange stillness which nothing could destroy. Could it not be accountable to alcohol? No; for he had drunk scarcely anything. And yet this inward joy he had known before. It had a way of coming to him and leaving him without his being able to direct its movement; suddenly, maybe when least he was expecting it, there it would be. Lying there in the dark he noticed that already the pale light of day was filtering

through the curtains, though not even so dismal a dawning could quench the happiness that welled up within him. That was it; this inmost joy it was that eclipsed whatever to others might be a source of delirium and even death. I must explore in this direction, he thought to himself; advance in this direction, go back to the point where everything began. Soon, however, he began to stumble in his path, to wander. Again, as under the chestnut trees of the Champs Elysées, he repeated aloud: "It is because I am young," knowing the while that such was no reason at all. Instinctively, and in a gesture of protest, he crossed his arms upon his chest, as if he would clasp more fondly to him that happiness of which he knew not the name.

XI

MARCEL, still half asleep, became aware that Tota had got up. A door banged and he heard her voice in angry expostulation with the maid of whose reply he could only make out a word here and there. All that he asked was that he might be left for as long as possible in peace and he lay hoping that he might not be drawn into this row, whatever the reason for it might be. His head ached and he felt very sick and he knew with hideous certainty that his excesses in smoking and drinking the night before would have to be paid for by a day of prolonged discomfort and nausea. With the return of consciousness, which persisted in spite of obstinately closed eyes, he became increasingly impressed with the necessity of remaining absolutely still.

Presently Tota came back into the room and drew apart the curtains, grumbling: "It's too bad! Going off without kissing me goodbye!" It was plainly no longer possible for Marcel to delay

any further his return to life. From under his lowered lids he could see Tota, thin and yellow in her worn dressing-gown, with that bilious look about her hard little face that a late night always gave her. Her hair, too, was on one side awry from where she had slept on it. Yawning, he said:

"What is too bad?"

"He left this morning without saying goodbye. And I made him promise that he would not go off like that. I hoped in that way that he might miss his train. . . . Perhaps he suspected as much. But no, he could think of nothing except La Hume and mamma. . . . I don't believe he cares the least bit for me."

As she was speaking Marcel could feel life flowing into him again just as the pale light of day was now filling the room. For the moment he was only alive to a feeling of overwhelming nausea. He was acutely aware of the existence of another form of misery lying in ambush for him, but first of all it was necessary to decide whether or not he should take some aspirin. There was always the danger that aspirin might make him sick. Maybe after all that would be the best thing that could happen. But, Lord, that stale reek of coffee! Evidently then, Tota had already had her breakfast. She sat down on the edge of the bed, her head in her hands. He asked her if she felt ill.

"I feel pretty bad myself," he said.

"But I drank nothing," she retorted, snappishly. "I have got a slight headache but that is from want of sleep, though as it was I slept far too well as I never heard Alain go."

"Well, what the devil does it matter, after all, if he is gone?"

He pulled himself up painfully, trying to find a cool spot on the pillow whereon to lay his burning head, and noticed that Tota made no reply to this question. How plain she looked this morning, this woman who was his wife, this stranger with whom his lot was cast. But, all the same, how young! Just like a little girl. And what about him? He only had to raise himself up slightly in

order to be shocked by what he would see in the mirror over the fireplace. He could well imagine what he looked like this morning. But Tota never even glanced at him; staring vacantly before her she saw nothing but the form of someone who was no longer there.

"But look, Tota; he had a way of pushing off like that. It may have been lacking a bit in manners, but why worry yourself about it?"

She merely shrugged her shoulders. As if that were it! As if between brother and sister there could arise questions of manners!

Nevertheless it seemed to Marcel that her mood was one more of anger than of sorrow; but seeing that her eyes were red he asked her if she had been crying, at which she turned on him, saying that this continual inquisition was more than she could bear, and burst into tears. Marcel had always been susceptible to tears; but so long as he knew that he himself was the direct cause of them he could not help feeling vaguely pleased. It was only now, thanks to Tota, that he could experience a sensation the full horror of which he had never imagined. Here were tears shed for another, an unknown ill in which he had no part at all, a grief which as it did not concern him he could not pretend to assuage.

"Darling," he said timidly; "is it because Alain has gone?"

She nodded without looking up. Then as she got up and made as if to leave the room he said sharply:

"Where are you going?"

Where did he think she was going? She was going to have a bath and dress; after that she would go out. Marcel hardly gave a thought to the question of what she could possibly find to do in her daily outings into the midst of so large and, to her, strange a city. His mind was taken up by another matter: why had Alain left? why this precipitate flight? True he had at the Bœuf on the previous night appeared not to be well. And he had been unwell on account of the stuffy atmosphere of the place; obviously a

youth straight from the country could be expected to breathe such air. . . . It had been, then, just a matter of feeling unwell. . . . Unless of course . . . No; his mother had telegraphed and naturally he had to go. There was no use in hunting around for a different reason, for there was none. Nothing in fact to do but to lie quite still and trust that both headache and sickness might in time wear off. . . Unfortunately that was to leave the telephone out of account. He need not have answered it, but anything to stop that infernal ringing:

"Did I wake you up? It's me, Hervé. Got a hangover? No, I haven't. I didn't drink and above all I didn't smoke. . . . Listen . . . Are you there? . . . Look, I wanted to ask you . . . Well, I wanted it to be understood that we were going off on Saturday together for the weekend. You don't mind undertaking this little lie for me? It's only in case Irène should ring you up, when you can confirm what I have already told her on the subject. . . ."

"No, I'm damned if I will. I'd rather not be mixed up in any of your fairy tales."

Hervé's voice showed that he was annoyed.

"How many times did I not do as much for you? How many lies do you suppose I didn't have to tell Marie Chavès for you . . . ?"

"That was quite different; it wasn't a question of my wife,—above all not of Irène. . . . (Hervé, furious, thought: "Why all this about Irène? What more is there to her than to any other woman?") In any case I remember that I promised to go and see her either to-morrow or the day after. She expects me. Even if I were to put off seeing her till later on she would be sure to telephone and ask me questions. And she isn't the sort who can be lied to. . . . But don't let us discuss all this over the telephone."

"Yes, that's true; we had better not. But I am speaking from my own room. . . . Yes, it's all right. But I'll fix it some other way for Saturday if I am going, and it's not absolutely certain yet."

Marcel rang off. The movement involved in holding this conversation made him feel sick again. It was not true that he had arranged to go and see Irène, but he decided now that he would go. He would confide in her. If anyone in the world could rid him of his nightmare it was Irène. She possessed all the virtues which are generally ascribed to men, not one of which, however, he had ever been able to discover in any of his men friends. So discreet was she that she appeared to forget anything told to her in confidence. The only creature that he knew who not only listened to what one said but was also actively helpful. Marie Chavès had been like that too, but then she had been in love with him, and however generous love is it is also terribly selfish. She had a way of deducing from his words what his real thoughts were and modelling her behaviour accordingly. But Irène's way was to try always to be of use, to do good; a sort of vocation in fact. One was so apt to forget that it was she who was the sufferer. It was so natural somehow to pour out all one's woes to her who was not only Hervé's wife but also in all probability a dying woman. He could even talk to her about Marie. It was a great pity that Irène could not see her again, take an interest in her, lend her books. . . . Books! Beside Irène he felt like an illiterate, a barbarian. Fancy getting something out of Nietzsche, for instance! Her salvation she thought was to be found in certain books but he knew well that nothing could console him for the want of that which he sought.

His thoughts wandered and presently came back to their well-worn path. "No," he said under his breath, "not that, surely not that! It cannot be; it doesn't make sense. Why shouldn't Tota be upset and unhappy at his leaving? My unhappiness is based upon nothing at all. What are its real foundations after all?" And then with his hand over his eyes he repeated: "Yes, I'll have a talk to Irène and then I shall see more clearly." And what did Irène think of Tota? She had actually met her only once; a Tota tongue-

tied, shy, who, no sooner had the door closed behind the other, had said: "I hate illness and ill people." Irène for her part during this interview had given the impression of being frozen in the presence of this girl, so young and of so patent a vitality.

XII

NEVER until that morning had it occurred to Irène that by means of her own telephone by her bedside she could overhear all that her husband might say when telephoning from the floor above. She ought, of course, immediately to have hung up the receiver so as not to hear what passed between Hervé and Marcel: it was the first time that she had ever done such a thing. So convinced was Hervé of her uprightness in this respect that he invariably left his letters lying about: he knew that she would never so much as glance at one of them.

Irène got up and standing before the mirror looked with questioning eyes at the phantom she there beheld. She had not even the excuse of having been taken by surprise, nor that her curiosity had got the better of her, for, for long past, Hervé had not bothered to cloak his lies, and what she had heard came to her as no new thing. She even inclined to regard it as rather touching that he should have on this occasion sought to bring in Marcel in order to spare her feelings as much as possible. But plainly, as she had overheard this conversation, she must let it be known that she had done so. Such was Irène's nature that no other course occurred to her to take; she must lose no time in confessing her lapse. Nevertheless she hesitated. Not from any particular feeling of shame, still less of fear, for both were well versed in the art of a tactful approach to a subject. (There is

something to be said after all, she thought, for having a husband who is a gentleman.) Notwithstanding, her heart was beating with unwonted violence as she prepared herself for the coming interview. Halfway up the stairs she had to pause for breath, and at that moment an idea, long since conceived, took life within her. Had it never occurred to her that she might put what had hitherto been only a fond aspiration into actual practice? And somehow it appeared to her that the hour of decision had come. She realised well enough what it was that was at stake. Little as she might hold to life yet she stayed, looking from her hand on the stair-rail to the dusty-smelling hall below and the worn stair carpet. She stood motionless, conscious of the sounds arising from the street, the sound of a horn, the screech of a brake, those sounds of every day which the ear registers but not the mind, and which to the dead are silence. "Come!" she said presently. But she appeared to change her mind for after pausing a moment as in reflexion she turned downstairs again, went into her bath-room, and began to make up her face before the glass. She rouged her cheeks and painted her lips more carefully than she was accustomed to do,—for she was notoriously indifferent to fashion. In fact she was well known to have no pretension to elegance either in dress or in style. Criticised above all was that heavy coil of hair which she wore too low on her neck; it was that had earned her in the Blénauge family, which was given to bestowing nicknames, the title of the Tragic Muse.

When she had finished she studied her face earnestly and dispassionately. Her forehead and her ears now appeared, in contrast to the rest of her face, more startling in their wax-like pallor than ever. (The thought of applying rouge to the ears never even occurred to her as possible.) She smiled, but with her lips only, and there was something terrifying in the effect of the bloodless gums as seen against the scarlet mouth. "And anyway," she exclaimed; "for whom is all this?" This time she laughed in

earnest and of a sudden, picking up a sponge, she destroyed in a moment all the work she had done.

She no longer cared now about her looks, those ravaged features which, in spite of all, bore a stamp of undeniable nobility in the brow and eyes. Like someone who feels the cold she wrapped her dressing-gown tightly around her and once more climbed the stairs. At the door she hesitated for a moment, then pulling herself together, she knocked.

Hervé was writing a letter. He looked up at her with undisguised astonishment, for as a rule she never entered his room, except occasionally when he was not there, to look for a book. For this reason his first question was:

"Do you want a book?"

She shook her head and sat down, closing her eyes. So pale was she that Hervé in alarm held out his hand.

"It's all right. I came up the stairs too quickly."

He waited, trying to think what could have brought her, while she dared not open her eyes to see that little care-worn face whose expression of mingled distrust and fear was only too painfully familiar to her.

"It's about the telephone," she said at length: "it had better be altered."

Hervé assured her that it was all right, that he had just been using it; but she, in a non-committal voice, replied simply that on the contrary it was not right since in the receiver in her room she could hear what was being said by anyone telephoning from above. She could imagine now the expression of anxiety on Hervé's face although still she could not bring herself to look at him.

"With you," he said, lightly, "that constitutes no drawback. I know you, Irène; no sooner did you hear my voice than you hung up the receiver . . . of course . . ."

But she shook her head.

"No," she said. "I don't know why but I kept on listening until you had finished; and I wanted first of all to apologise for so mean an action."

Doubtless he was picturing to himself the appalling scene that another woman might have made. All he said was: "Irène!" in a tone of voice which revealed both admiration and shame. He was perfectly sincere, for the space of a few seconds; then in a flash he began to cast about as to the best way of profiting by this attitude. He thought that Irène would leave without more ado and felt aggrieved when he noticed that she remained seated where she was. Surely, he thought, she was not going to have the bad taste to ask for an explanation?

Covertly he watched her: her breathing was rapid and there was a feverish flush on her cheeks. (The thought came to him: Terral says that cancer is not accompanied by fever. Romieu thinks that she has an internal tumour.) Long ago when she was but a girl and he was thinking of marrying her, even then he used to tell his friends that Irène Verley had a death's-head look about her. But now! You could see all the bones of her face through the tightly drawn skin. One day, and soon perhaps, he would be free . . . Hervé, overcome with horror at his own callousness, shut his eyes while almost imperceptibly his head shook. He took Irène by the hand:

"Dearest . . ."

He hardly dared to squeeze the hand which lay in his, this hot little parcel of bones. Presently she began:

"I wish . . ."

He hardly knew her in this humble, almost suppliant, guise.

"On Saturday, Hervé, and Sunday . . . I would like . . . and remember that as a rule I never ask favours of you" (so long was it since she had used the familiar "tu") "this is perhaps the first time—and maybe the last. I want you to let me have those days. So that I can forget what I overheard. If I feel well

enough we might go to a concert. No, I see that that would bore you. But perhaps you would read to me. You like reading aloud."

He became panic-stricken at the thought of this thing to which he had been looking forward, in expectation of which he had been counting the days and hours, being snatched now out of his grasp. He replied in haste:

"But of course, to-night as ever is, and to-morrow, do let us start in on some book that you are fond of, something very long which will take us weeks to get through: *War and Peace*, why not? or *The Mill on the Floss*?"

"Not to-night," she said, and as she spoke her voice shook. "On Saturday . . . shall we?"

He did not care to encounter those eyes bright with fever and stammered that he would have liked to have but he had a party fixed up with some friends, that it was too late now to warn them, that unfortunately he could not very well run out. It was, he said, most annoying that he could not do it but she must not demand the impossible of him.

"But, please, Hervé."

Her voice was so serious and earnest that Hervé was surprised. Usually when she let herself in for a scene of this kind (only never before had she made quite so absurd a demand) Irène had managed quickly to draw back, covering her retreat with a few mocking words. But to-day she was insistent.

"You must do this."

Hervé was frightened. He knew quite well that no one in the world could really turn him from this pleasure that he had seen before him, and that he was prepared to sacrifice anything at all in order to attain it. But as he looked at Irène he had a confused feeling that some such sacrifice would indeed be necessary; that he would have to reach his goal over her broken body. Furiously he defended his threatened passion: every evening of this week, i

she liked, and every evening of next week, all except Saturday and Sunday, those two days only excepted.

"Never mind, it can't be helped."

She rose; so tall and so thin she looked as she gazed steadily at Hervé. This was the requisite sign for her to make up her mind to do that which she had long been contemplating doing. She had obeyed an atavistic religious impulse; had consulted the oracle, questioned this futile Sphinx, this miserable specimen of manhood. And now . . .

She raised her eyes to the window and was struck by the delicate pink colour of three chimney pots against the dark blue of the sky—like the teats of some young animal, while to every sound which the human ear can hear in a town on a winter morning she listened.

"I'm sorry," she said.

The door had already closed behind her when Hervé reopened it.

"Irène!" he called. "Listen!"

She knew then that he had understood. He said:

"I'll fix it all right. Don't worry."

In the darkness of the passage he could not see her face, only her long thin form against the wall. Breathlessly she asked:

"You will stay in?"

"Yes."

"Saturday evening? Sunday?"

He repeated Yes, firmly. He heard her breathing quickly and watched her as she disappeared, feeling her way along the wall with one hand, like a blind person.

XIII

TOWARDS the evening of this same day Marcel was awaiting the return home of Tota, who was already very late. It was not that he was alarmed at the thought of what she might be doing, but he feared that she might have met with an accident; with her country upbringing she was little used to street-crossings. He drew a sigh of relief when he heard the front door bell.

"I was beginning to feel nervous . . ."

"I am worn out . . ."

She chattered volubly of fittings and of an exhibition at Bernheim's. She mistook his air of anxiety for one of suspicion. Who knows, she thought? Perhaps he is having me followed. How much does he know of my movements to-day? Had someone already reported having seen her in William's car, where she had indeed been for two hours. And to think that William, the fool had banked on her being either so tired or so cold that she would agree to go home with him, or to the studio of that friend of his who was away on holiday. True, she had been calm enough knowing full well her own strength of determination. But would Marcel believe her if she were to tell him the truth, which was that she had never for one instant felt in danger in the company of that boy with the drawn features, so tired looking in fact as to be positively ugly? Would he believe her if she stated exactly how he had appeared to her that afternoon in the car with a cigarette stump in the corner of his mouth, a spotty complexion and the sort of breath which is the result of too much smoking and too little sleep? Each time she set out uplifted by the thought of the risk she was going to incur, a prey at once to the fear of and the longing for adventure, and each time from the very first

glance she knew that nothing could possibly happen. Nor could she have said whether in consequence relief or deception was the feeling left uppermost in her mind. She could only continue to play with this desire and to get what excitement she could out of her pitiable pretences. "No, thank you, I am not hungry," she kept on repeating to William. "I am not tired. I am not cold. . . . Perhaps I *am* rather hungry, but for a cake; in a baker's shop. Do you know, I am still under the spell of the places we used to go to in Bordeaux when we were children and eat cakes,—such fun."

"How much does he know?" Tota thought as she watched Marcel, and then aloud:

"Are we going to dine here?"

Which was a thing they very rarely did.

"Have you got nothing on this evening?"

He shook his head, looking up at her.

"All the better," she said. "Then I'll go straight to bed as soon as we've had dinner and read."

It struck her as being odd that he should so willingly agree to remain at home. They sat down to a somewhat scanty meal; Maria had omitted to put out any wine. Every time that Tota raised her eyes she found Marcel looking at her. It would seem that he must know something. But what? Of course it was quite on the cards that someone might have seen them kissing in the car.

"It would happen that just when there's nothing to eat I should feel particularly hungry. What about you?" said Tota at last.

No, he was not hungry. He lit a cigarette and rose from the table. She also rose and suddenly made up her mind:

"There was something I did to-day . . . something I must confess . . . I acted without really thinking. . . ."

And as he said nothing she went on:

"I was in the Boulevard Haussmann when I heard someone calling me; it was William in his Talbot. I was carrying some par-

cels, so he took pity on me and gave me a lift. I never thought of its perhaps being rather compromising. We went up through the Bois to St. Cloud and Meudon. Afterwards, I could have kicked myself. . . ."

"Did anyone see you?"

"Not that I know of."

He shrugged his shoulders as much as to say: Well, what does it matter then?

She watched him anxiously, fearing some trap.

"You aren't annoyed with me?"

He shook his head. Laughing she said:

"And I who thought you were jealous!"

"Jealous of William? You don't want me to be, do you?"

She was slightly taken aback that he should be so contemptuous of William; and yet his serious and preoccupied expression belied his words. Could it be that the cause of his worry had nothing to do with her at all? She felt a twinge of annoyance.

"Have you had bad news from the nursing home? Is *she* any worse?"

"No, of course not," he replied. "No need for you to worry about Marie."

"Isn't the cure a success? Poor soul! You can talk to me about her, you know, if you like."

He got up and caught her by the wrists:

"Look here," he said; "don't play the hypocrite, and don't pretend to be jealous."

He went and sat down again beyond the circle of light cast by the lamp, holding one hand before his face. She could not tell what the reason for his suffering might be; she only knew that it was at least on her own account, because of her. No longer a prey of uncertainty on this score, Tota's feeling for her husband was merely the old feeling of irritation, and petulantly she asked him what she had done wrong.

"Oh, nothing," he said, "nothing."

Then after a pause, and without looking up:

"You are glad that Alain is gone?"

"Yes, because he will come back."

"Did he promise you that he would?"

"No, but I want him to, and he always does what I want. And, funnily enough, he said the same thing of me. But I don't worry; I won't have to make a fuss about it."

For the space of several minutes neither spoke. Presently Marcel again broke the silence:

"When Alain marries . . ."

"What are you talking about? He is nineteen . . . And anyway . . . No, I don't think my future sister-in-law is born yet."

"It's my belief," said Marcel with a laugh, "that you would tear her eyes out."

But she only answered sulkily that she could not tear out the eyes of someone who did not exist.

Marcel was astonished to find comfort in these words whose intention had been to wound. And all of a sudden he realised the full extent of his folly. It appeared so forcibly to him and so clearly defined that he never thought it possible that he was capable still of entertaining it. Lolling back at ease in an armchair he lit a cigar. As by a miracle a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. This girl who passed before him backwards and forwards from this room to that, aimlessly, was his wife. She loved no one—probably not even himself. Everything was yet to do. But now that he was delivered from that nightmare . . . He called her. She replied that she was busy, but a moment later she came in and he watched her crossing the room slowly. Putting a record on to the gramophone she made idle semblance of dancing a few steps and then sat down, but a long way from him. What could he say to her? Now that his mental anguish had disappeared Marcel found difficulty in discovering what connection there was between

them. They could find nothing to say to one another. The needle screeched on the record. When would he make up his mind to buy a new gramophone:

She sighed and then yawned, saying:

"I'm bored . . . and I think I'm rather hungry."

"It's quite true that there was little enough to eat."

She looked at him.

"What about going to the 'Plantation'?" It wouldn't take a minute to dress. . . ."

The very name gave promise already of removing the deadly prospect of a tete-a-tete. Marcel felt humiliated to think that he was incapable of passing so much as one evening alone in Tota's company, but he cheered himself with the thought that he would be able to drink.

"But you were tired?"

She protested that she was no longer tired, that she felt hungry and wanted to dance.

"It's rather early," he said, feebly.

"Well then, we can step into the Bœuf first." William had told her that he would wait for her at the bar until midnight.

"All right," replied Marcel; "but I shan't dress."

Tota said that she would change her dress. They were now so impatient to be gone, to be no longer immured together within four walls that one might have thought the house had been on fire; already were they lost, in spirit, in the light, the noise, the reek of other couples.

From the bathroom she called out to him:

"I'll be ready by the time you get a taxi."

He was re-tying his tie at the mirror and could see her behind him as she prolonged the line of her plucked eyebrows delicately with a marking pencil. And as she stood polishing her nails her eyes were void of all expression.

XIV

ALTHOUGH it was still daylight outside, Irène interrupted Hervé's reading to make him draw the curtains and light the lamp. Hervé did so, resumed his seat, and continued to read aloud. He had to come close to the lamp in order to see, so that the lower part of his face, his hands and the book itself were all clearly visible to Irène; but he, whenever he looked up, was scarcely able to make out her face where it lay half-buried in the pillow. Now and then he would stop reading and she would say in a weak voice:

"I am listening . . ." and he would go on like a good little boy reading his lesson. His voice in fact was exactly that of a school-boy whom his parents have kept in, who is resigned only because he can see no way of avoiding the task which they have set him, but whose thoughts are all the time elsewhere,—with his comrades, at the circus, following his lost enjoyment.

Never had Irène been more struck by Hervé's youthful appearance. He looked so young, so deplorably young. She had hoped, on this Saturday which he had agreed to sacrifice for her sake, to go out with him. Unfortunately she had, the night before, in order to make certain of fortifying herself by a good night's rest, overdone her dose of gardenal. So that now it was all that she could do to keep awake. Hervé, satisfied in the knowledge that he was doing his duty, never for a moment suspected that his underlying sense of grievance could be as plainly noticeable as in fact it was.

She wondered whether he realised that he had actually saved her life; that upon this slight sacrifice her life had depended—as much, that is, of her life as remained. Or had it been but play-acting on her part? No; she alone could appreciate her longing for sleep. No one else could possibly understand the force of that

longing. She could not stand any longer being eaten alive; her strength was giving out. For she had counted upon Hervé refusing her demand; just a little push towards the abyss, towards the gulf of night, that was what she had asked of him. And now, contrary to all expectation, there he sat with his piteous air of a dog that has been chained up. . . . It was stupid of her to double the dose of gardenal as it made it impossible for her to follow the sense of what Hervé was reading. And it was so lovely, this *Life of Nietzsche*, by Halévy. Collecting her wandering thoughts she made a great effort of concentration:

“I am a hunter of men, in pirate guise, not to sell them into slavery but to bear them along with me to freedom! But youth was not taken by the thought of this unbridled freedom which he set before it. M. Scheffler, one of his students, recalls the following incident: “I was at that time attending Nietzsche’s lectures, but my personal acquaintanceship with him was of the slightest. One day it so happened that I fell in with him coming out of the lecture hall and we continued on our way together. The sky was full of piled-up clouds. ‘Beautiful clouds,’ he said; ‘and how swiftly they move!’ ‘Yes,’ I answered; ‘they are like Paul Veronese’s clouds,’ and suddenly his hand was on my arm. ‘Listen,’ he said, ‘the holidays are here and I shortly will be setting out on my travels. Why not come with me and together we can watch the clouds at Venice.’ I was taken by surprise and stammered a few hesitant words. Straightway I saw Nietzsche turn his head from me while the expression on his face became frigid and reserved, as if all life had gone out of it. Presently he made off without another word and left me to myself.”

Irène had managed to follow the story to the end. Nietzsche, she thought, provided us with an answer, a rule of life. He discovered something;—not like those others who lack even the urge for discovery. And yet, is it possible to make discoveries? Ought one even to try? How hard it is to get at the truth! Yet in

spite of everything I go on trying, as if there were something to be found at the end of it all. "And that is because I am not a free agent," she added, unaware that she was speaking aloud.

"What did you say?" asked Hervé.

She said she was sorry; she had spoken at random.

"You're not listening. . . . You're dozing," he said tartly. "Would you rather that I stopped?"

But above all things she dreaded the effort involved in making conversation. He read on in his obedient schoolboy's voice: "Deeds are deceptive; they seldom are what they appear to be. With how much toil and trouble have we learnt that the things of the outward world are quite other than their appearance would lead us to believe! And so it is also with the inner life. Our deeds are in reality something else. There is no more to be said on this point: everything we do is essentially unknown."

Hervé paused in his reading, saying: "How fine that is!" She understood that it was to himself that he was applying the words and was touched. Yes, truly, every act was an unknown quantity. She must not therefore pass judgment upon Hervé. In any case in her eyes he had never stood condemned. In her weakness she could no longer struggle against her drowsiness, nor follow any more the voice that trailed on and on. Memories of lectures she had attended came into her mind: "Human reason is flexible and should provide a fresh solution for every problem on its own merits"; that applied to Hervé. It was not right to judge him according to a fixed and rigid standard. . . .

The sound of the front door bell brought her back with a start to full consciousness.

"Did you tell them that I was not at home to anyone?"

"Perhaps it is Mamma . . ."

"To her least of all: tell her that I am resting."

Hervé left the room, and no sooner was he in the darkened passage outside than he recognised his mother's voice.

"Is that you, my son?"

Her black dress and aged furs exuded a faint smell of vinegar and pepper. She did not give him time to lie; seeing that he was there, she said, it was not necessary for her to come in. She felt relieved, for she had not expected to find him there. It pleased her that he should be at his wife's bedside. And how was she?

"She is quiet; rather weak. But then she eats nothing."

"I'll leave you together."

The old lady beamed at him as she spoke the words.

"I am reading aloud to her," added Hervé, with complacency.

"That is nice," she replied, embracing him. "And look, I've brought some violets. . . ."

Hervé came back into the bedroom.

"It was Mamma. She's gone. She brought you some violets."

"Cut the stalks and put them in the smaller vase, please. . . . Yes, go on reading."

It is no light task, when weakened by illness, to keep awake. Nevertheless what few words she could yet hear and understand impressed themselves deeply upon her consciousness: "Whither are we going? Would we fare across the sea? Whereto is this so urgent passion bearing us? Who knows but of us also one day it may be said that holding ever westward, we hoped to reach the Indies hitherto unknown, but that it was our fate to come to grief in sight of the infinite. Or else, my masters, . . . ?"

Irène's imagination was struck by that "or else." Or else, perhaps, we shall not come to grief? Ridiculous obstinacy; she was then bent upon discovery; she could not be a free agent. Her thoughts turned to the sea which she would never see again; and confusedly of that yet lovelier sea stretching beyond the shades of illness, of lonely suffering, of death itself. She is amazed by the profundity of this joy welling up from who knows what springs within her being, not certainly from anything connected with

Hervé's presence beside her, for she is not thinking any more of Hervé. A few scattered words are all that reach her now through the veil of unconsciousness:

"*'Lux mea crux,'* Nietzsche had written in his notes, *'crux mea lux.'* The Light is my cross; the Cross is my Light. His unrest, which the passage of time did nothing to allay, was becoming acute. And it alarmed him for he was aware of that ever present threat whose shadow lay across his life: 'Wherever I look around my bounded horizon I see dimly the shapes of thoughts,—such thoughts. . .'"

Hervé noticed that his wife had fallen asleep, and closed the book. The sound of her breathing was scarcely perceptible. The lamp shone upon her wasted arm lying on the quilt. It was probable that this sleep would last for many hours, for so it usually happened when she had taken an overdose of gardenal. He looked at his watch: five o'clock only. He thought it had been far later . . . But Irène, he remembered, had told him to draw the curtains when it was yet daylight.

"At this very moment I ought to be . . ."

But they had not gone away for the week-end; it had all been put off till the following month. Supposing him now to be free he would know well enough where to go. And what was to prevent his going now that she was asleep? No, for he had promised. But at least he might go out just to stretch his legs and buy some cigarettes. By eight o'clock he could be back. And yet he well knew that, once outside, nothing would bring him back: it would be a case of dinner, then on somewhere, then the night and maybe even the whole of the next day, as it generally was.

The maid came in to shut the outside shutters. Hervé signed to her to make no noise. Irène never stirred. Fast asleep! If only he could be sure that he would have the strength of mind to come away before dinner he would go off with a clear conscience, for

surely she would never wake up before he got back. Fatal to dwell upon that thought! Was he not only too well aware that he never could resist so subtle a temptation?

"Now," he said to himself, "I cannot possibly not go."

And, after all, what risk was there? Between himself and Irène there could no longer be any deception. Even supposing that he were not to return at all this evening it would only be on a par with what had happened many times already. She would not mind; would bear him no grudge. She knew, none better, that it was the business of an ailing wife to be indulgent, to shut her eyes. It was true, all the same, that he would very likely have behaved no better even had she not been ill.

"So if I do go out now, and if I am a bit late in returning, it will at any rate be nothing new."

Why was it that he felt the necessity of persuading himself that it would be nothing new? Certain it was that he had many a time disappeared even for several days. But then he had not been breaking any definite promise, whereas now . . . "I did it on the impulse of the moment." And perhaps she would not think anything of it. And yet, no. Not impulse. No one could be less impulsive than Irène herself. He had given way to a hidden threat, to a stern command, although it had come to him couched in the most ordinary of terms.

In any case had he not remained by her side for several hours? The day was over: it was now evening and she was asleep. Nor did the promise he had given tie him down to any precise details. How fast asleep she was!

Rising, he leaned over her, listening to her quick breathing. He thought: "If she has not wakened by six . . ." He felt calmer now as if the matter had been taken out of his hands and awaited the decision of a higher power. Frequently and anxiously he looked at his watch, not knowing what it was that he so longed for, or rather knowing well enough but fearing it. He was afraid.

Whatever happens," he said to himself, "I shall feel every bit as miserable as happy."

If she were to wake it would end this agony, but likewise this hope. Wretched hope, in which the heart has no share; a fleshly hope gripping and twisting at every fibre of a body at once obsessed and possessed. He made pretence to believe that he really wanted Irène to wake up, but for all that he refrained from turning a page of the book or lighting a cigarette, and he held his breath in agony when with the passing of a lorry in the street below the window rattled.

In order to wile away the time he amused himself by thinking of this enjoyment that he was to taste, that he would taste if the woman lying there before him only remained asleep. And in the state of mind in which he now had reached nothing in the world could stay him from that happiness. Even if Irène were now to waken, to sit up and hold out those thin arms to him he knew that he would invent a pretext to be gone. Would even a pretext be necessary? All he would say would be: "I can do no more; please take back my promise."

Now and then from the lips of the sleeping woman came a sort of hissing noise, and her arm would lift in an uncertain gesture as if even while asleep she found it necessary to defend herself against someone. But Hervé was oblivious of all things save one—those delights so long deferred and now in contemplation approaching. And such was the reflection in his face of this foretasted gratification of desire that even his mother, had she seen him at that moment, would have shrunk from him in horrified surprise.

At the first stroke of six Hervé got up. He did not stop to lean over the unmoving form in the bed; he did not so much as turn his head in that direction.

XV

THE sound of the front door closing awakened Irène, just as long ago when she was a child the banging to of the front door behind her father at eleven o'clock every night after the servants had gone upstairs to bed, used to wake her up with a start to a realization of her loneliness and neglect. Although she knew well enough that it was Hervé who had gone she rang for her maid in order to have the knowledge confirmed. She said that she would take nothing, that she was going to sleep and that in the morning she would ring when she wished to be called. Then she felt at peace.

Hervé had done well to leave her. What could he have done after all for a sleeping invalid? And supposing that Irène herself had decided to give the signal, supposing it had been she who had implored this little push towards the abyss, Hervé could not be blamed for not having understood. And in any case, she thought, who of us can ever be called guilty, and what is there in the word? Even let it be supposed that he had had a vague impression that her fate lay in his hands how highly could he be expected to value a life already half destroyed? Moreover, did he really believe in this theory of a consumptive tendency, as he said he did? Did he not know that she was dying slowly from a different cause: that she was being eaten away, destroyed piecemeal? All the more reason then to pity her and make this sacrifice for her . . . But no, there was no reason to pity, and sacrifice is nothing but a word.

Clearly he could not have any affection for her in her present state. All that could be expected of him was that he should bear the love that he formerly had towards her in remembrance, and spare her on that account. But in fact he had never loved her,

never, not even for a moment. Irène could draw no comfort from outside, nothing but the suffocation of the thoughts which hemmed her in; there was nothing to acclaim the love that she felt within her, the longing to offer herself and to be a worthy offering. . . . But worthy of whom, of what? Worthy, worth, "For truly, Lord, the best in all our heritage—That we can show for proof of an enduring worth—Is in that heartfelt sigh which sounds from age to age." And did Baudelaire really believe that? A poet of course has a right to put a name to what he feels to be the cause of his unrest: God. Perchance it is the object that is created by the wish? Consolation is engendered by the grief which demands it.

Yet to Irène such thoughts were detestable. She asked for no consolation; she had no need of sympathy. She was not of those poor ones who reply to their own questions in order to deceive themselves into thinking they are not alone. She was afraid neither of annihilation nor of physical pain; nor above all would she have it thought or said afterwards that it was because of the pain from which she had suffered that she had . . . Yet what should it matter to her what others might think!

Who knows but if only she had had a child it might have stilled this clamant questioning within her! Of course; that was it. Funny that she had never thought of that before. She felt oddly relieved that she had found a name at last for the cause of her trouble: a frustrated maternal instinct. Although, God knows, children had never attracted her much. . . . Ah! the pain! If only she could walk up and down a little bit; but she was too weak to get out of bed.

There was a half filled glass of water within reach: she took it and swallowed one, two, three, six cachets.

Had it not been for the fact that she was an invalid she might have helped certain people. Marcel would miss her. He had wanted to take her to see Marie in that nursing-home. "Yes, ill

as I was, I might have done something for them." Marcel had told her once that he always treated whatever she might say with particular attention. But had she expected to be listened to when she attempted that time to instil into Marie Chavès's mind ideals of a life of usefulness and beauty—(to struggle to perfect the ego; to get to know all that was greatest in literature; to wrest from Nietzsche the secret of self-betterment)? Marie had indeed listened eagerly, but that had not prevented her, that very same evening, from seeking forgetfulness. Nothing consoles those who have once known love for the loss of it. She was a hypocrite, pretending that people had been sent into the world to understand, when in fact to love was the whole purpose of their being.

Words, words! What did Marie and Marcel matter to her? Hervé. She had loved him even in those far off days at the dancing-class when he would always arrive late wearing that flower in his buttonhole which used to make the others laugh. One day he had given it to her. . . . "It was because of my money. Among his lot it almost always is. He used to attend every concert so that I should see him: he even attended Pierre Janet's lectures at the Collège de France and those of Delacroix at the Sorbonne, and he would sit down beside me and write his notes. I let myself be taken in; I deliberately acted the part of being loved in spite of the fact that I had been told that he had made enquiries at the Bank regarding my income. And even so the marriage very nearly never came off. For that was the year that papa lost two million at Deauville and had it not been that he died immediately afterwards on his return to Paris the negotiations would certainly have been broken off. I well remember how one day, during our engagement, Hervé said to me that his friends were becoming positively jealous. It happened of course that I was the best he could hope for seeing that his mother would not hear of his marrying either a Jewess or an American. I was an orphan with-

out near relations, and moreover, Kina Verley was held on all sides to be a perfectly straightforward concern. . . . No talking to him about ill-gotten gains; on that point he would be adamant. While I, I loved him . . . and she, that old bigot, my mother-in-law, did she know then what I know now? No, no; don't let us think of that. . . ."

In her wandering but still conscious mind she could picture objectively her own love and what it had been that she had loved; there in the midst of a wide expanse of sea, glittering beneath the sky, was a minute point of rock, encircled and lapped by innumerable waves, immovable, indifferent; Hervé. What could she have found so to hold by in that neat-featured but weak and sly little face! Never had she been able to think with such clarity. She knew that no one could possibly look on her with desire or cherish her. She had thought that it was possible to live loving someone without having that love returned; that love, were it only long-suffering enough, could in the end reform in its own image the being upon whom all its riches were lavished. She recalled all Hervé's equivocations and lies and tried dispassionately to consider him as he was. Poor fool that she had been! The only power she had ever had over him was the power to repel him; a power of repulsion! As a matter of preference he had always chosen to be anywhere rather than in her company.

How strange a thing it is, she thought, this tremendous driving force of a love projected into the void, this solemn uplifting of a heart towards emptiness! As long as she could remember, from her earliest childhood, it had been so; from the time when it had been her doll that she had crushed to her heart in accesses of unimaginable devotion, lying in her little cot . . . And the flat in the rue Vézelay. Many times since then, in other flats, had she recognised the peculiar smell which greeted one on entering. The chinese lamps, on the mantelpiece of the minute drawing-room, were lit by gas; one day she broke one of the mantles. She had

been eight years old when her parents separated, yet she could not recollect any scenes or arguments between them. On the contrary she was rather under the impression that they had been too polite one to the other. She had only remained for a few months in the flat in the rue Vézelay with her father before going to the Lycée Duruy. Yet it had seemed a long time, perhaps because of her loneliness at night after the noise of the front door being slammed behind her father when he went out woke her up with a start. None of the servants slept on her floor, but the speaking-tube which communicated with the concierge below was pointed out to her as a means of attracting attention should she require to do so. As to her mother she bore her no grudge: you had the right to make a fresh start if you wished. But in her mother's new life there was no place for Irène; another husband, another country, other children. Nor could she pretend that it had greatly troubled her. . . . Mdlle. Fermeil at the Lycée: "Spinoza, Nietzsche, when you are a little older. Above all, intelligence. The cultivation of the mind. Whoso sincerely follows the good cannot perform a mean action." But what was this good which one must follow? "The poor." Irène had always had an idea that by the mere fact of visiting the poor and ministering to their wants she somehow justified the existence of poverty. Such hypocrites, too, they were. They thought she was devout, talked about "the little one's first Communion," were so anxious always to say exactly what they imagined she wished them to say. At the dispensary at least she was able to attend to their bodily needs without talking. Never once had she let them see that she was either sorry for them or loved them; at no time had she given herself away. They thought her unsympathetic, aloof in her manner. To herself she readily admitted that it was the sick and suffering that interested her most. Suffering, illness; that was the normal lot of man. Diseases by the thousand . . . And even those who were well purposely made themselves ill in order as it were, to rejoin the

brotherhood. One ought to concern oneself with those whose bodies are diseased. Of what use was love? A fire burning away for no one, and to no purpose. This passion for giving, even giving oneself, and no one to receive the gift. No one.

The glass now stands empty but the carafe is still half full of water. If only she could overcome her lethargy, fill up the glass, swallow as many cachets as possible for soon she will be beyond trying. Where was Hervé at this minute? With whom? Doing what? Why should it be so painful a thought? Evil. How obsessed she had been by that riddle! A chivalric order.

Too late now to think of that. Those bonds of which Nietzsche spoke, which he himself held to be unbreakable: "That upward surge of feeling which comes over us in the presence of that which has been venerated from time immemorial." Parodi's "*Le Problème Moral*" . . . a feeble work. She had not had time to read it all yet. So many roads all leading nowhere. To nothingness. Slowly she was sinking into unconsciousness.

"Come in!" Had she spoken the words out loud or only thought them? "Come in." It must be the concierge, rue de la Gaité, she of the numerous family of children, she to whom Irène used to give injections twice a week. Surely that is who it was who answered just now: "It is I," though the voice was not her voice. There were others lying there whom Irène could recognise in spite of the darkness, some flat on the floor, others propped up against the wall. She must have left the light on by her bedside. . . . No, it is not that, but the gleam of those parts of their bodies which show between the bandages and lighten the darkness. Those bodies which conceal no secret from her who has so many times untied the bandages, who is familiar with those sores, who is accustomed to their smell. From each one came the same answer: "It is I," as if for all their numbers they formed but one. Marcel and Hervé, too, were leaning over her now, part of that great crowd of sick people, and themselves the worst. She

was in pain, but no longer of the body. Slowly it was dawning upon her now that there was yet another kind of renouncement, another night, another death than this night, than this death that she had so wilfully sought. Sinking, drowning, she could not regain the surface and the air; her strength was gone. She clutched frenziedly, until her nails were broken, her elbows torn and bleeding. The great discovery was not for her; not hers to fall upon her knees, to weep for joy. No witness to be borne. She must pass through this darkness into which she had so madly plunged now to the bitter end. But as she slipped into the very abyss she knew, she saw, she cried aloud at last unto that love by the name which is above all other names.

XVI

THE maid ushered Marcel into the dining-room where were arrayed the Comtesse de Blénauge, the cook and the chauffeur.

"Where is Hervé? Do you know?"

Such was the old lady's first question to Marcel without troubling to reply to his stammered expressions of sympathy. She was still wearing her cloak with the hood drawn over her head. At the edge of the hood a few stray locks of yellow-white hair were visible. Beside her, on a marble-topped table, lay her worn black bag together with an umbrella and a pair of shabby black gloves.

The maid took up her tale again: Madame had told her not to call her until she rang. Madame often did not get to sleep till nearly daylight and only woke up at about mid-day. She had been in to call Madame once but had gone out again, thinking that Madame was in a deep sleep. This maid, who had been in her

present post only a fortnight, had not had the least suspicion that anything was wrong. It was the cook who, on her return from market, began to be alarmed. She drew up the blinds and opened the shutters and immediately grasped what had happened. The body was already cold; there was evidence on the sheets of violent sickness. The carafe of water had been upset. A few cachets remained on the plate. The poor lady had imagined that they could be taken with impunity, in spite of the fact that Monsieur had told her to take care. Chemists ought not to be allowed to sell such things to anyone without telling them that they were poisonous.

"No," Madame de Blénage was saying in answer to a question addressed to her by Marcel, "you cannot see her yet. Two nuns, Monsieur, are with her at this moment"; then somewhat shamefacedly avoiding his glance, she added: "Surely you can say where Hervé is to be found?"

Marcel shook his head and turned his eyes towards the chauffeur. He was a middle-aged man with an honest, countryman's look about him. He understood that no one liked to question him directly but that he was expected to say something. He said that Monsieur never used the car in the daytime, preferring to take taxis.

Marcel could not remember Irène's mother's address. All he knew was that she lived in London and that her husband wrote plays, if indeed he was not a theatrical manager. But he did not know his name.

"Hervé will tell us. . . . He will be here at any minute."

"One never knows when Monsieur will be in. It might be this evening, or to-morrow, or the day after."

No one volunteered any comment upon this reflexion on the part of the maid. Through the tall window the chill winter sunshine poured into the room. Everyone was staring at the zinc roofs opposite bristling with chimney pots; a workman upright against the sky seemed preternaturally large. Presently Madame

de Blénauge was heard to mutter: "My poor legs." She sat down on the chair which Marcel brought forward for her and remained still. One of the nuns came in and spoke to her in a whisper. The old lady shook her head:

"No crucifix to be found in the house!"

She opened her bag and from the tangle of keys therein produced a rosary which the nun carried off. Marcel said that in order to get all the arrangements made there was nothing for it but to await Hervé's return.

"Should he not be back by to-morrow morning we shall have to consider what is best to do."

At that moment the maid, acutely receptive to any sound which might denote Monsieur's return, cried out, almost gleefully: "The lift!" A deathly silence fell on the room. There came the sound of the iron grille shutting, then that of a key turning in the lock.

In order that the entrance-hall should be lighter the dining-room doors had been replaced by a curtain which except during meal-time was drawn aside. So it was that Hervé, as soon as he came in, could see the crowd in the dining-room. In a flash he understood. As if actuated by an inaudible command the four servants disappeared into the pantry where they stood listening behind the door. All they heard were these words, spoken by the old lady in a hard voice:

"Go into her room!"

She had turned her head away from him when he stooped to kiss her. His collar was crumpled and he plainly had not shaved. His glance wavered from his mother to his friend: he said, speaking the word with an effort:

"The gardenal?"

Marcel lowered his head in affirmation.

"Is there any hope?"

He asked the question although he felt he knew that all was over.

He took Marcel's arm but Madame de Blénaugé stopped him: "No," she said, harshly, to Marcel, "stay where you are. Let him go into that room alone."

Hervé looked at her in dumb amazement. He must be dreaming: it could not be true. He crept away quickly: Irène dead was less to be feared than this mother of his whom he hardly recognised, who appeared no longer to be fond of him. He opened the door, went out, and shut it behind him. Marcel remained where he was, hardly daring to disobey the little old lady seated before him on a chair with her eyes shut. For several minutes an absolute silence reigned till at length she said:

"You may join him now if you wish."

Once more by herself she remained in the same attitude. Only her head shook slightly, as often happens with old people: it was as if she was saying No over and over again to someone. She opened her worn old bag, looking for her rosary, then remembered that she had given it to the Sister. So she began to recite the rosary on her fingers, but presently stopped. She found she was unable to pray. All that she felt capable of doing for the moment was to prevent herself from thinking.

There was a dish on the side-board containing some bananas and oranges, and so hungry did she feel that it was only by an effort that she refrained from eating them. Not for a long time had she felt so hungry. She got up from her chair, took her bag and umbrella, and went out into the passage. Outside the bedroom door she remained for a moment listening: not a sound: one would have thought that the room was empty. She decided not to go in, as if still fearing to encounter her daughter-in-law's look of irritation. And of what use would it be now to stand by that bedside? How many times had she in the past stood just where she now was, not daring to enter that room so certain was she that by her very presence she would exasperate the unhappy child! But it had been necessary; at least she had always held it to

be necessary; although Irène had not found it difficult to escape from her care at the last! She ought to have been with her all the time. Yet she had come on the previous evening, and had it not been that Hervé had been there Irène need never have known. And to think that she had actually trusted Hervé! No need now to overcome the dread she felt at the thought of opening that door. It was the soul of Irène that she had loved, not that hard little face, that frigid and unapproachable manner. But there was nothing that she could do for Irène now; there was nothing further for her to do here at all; it only remained for her to creep home and await her own turn. The Master could do what He pleased with a good-for-nothing old woman, all of whose cherished plans He had brought to naught. . . . She cast a glance almost of hate at the closed door: let Hervé and his victim settle it between them!

But had it not been that she knew that Hervé had a friend with him she would have stayed.

XVII

NEVERTHELESS within the chamber of death they were not seated side by side. They were separated not only by the dead woman but by their incommunicable thoughts. Marcel gazed at the noble forehead as seen now in repose. How deep an impression the spirit had left upon the flesh. Nevermore from those lips would come the longed for words, nor those above all upon which he had counted for reassurance. He felt that he was now handed over irrevocably into the power of that doubt from which Irène and she alone could have delivered him. And in the fact that she should have died on the very day on which he had decided to come and implore her help he, ever

superstitiously inclined, saw the sign of a sinister intervention on the part of Providence.

Unless the true answer to that which he had sought to ask of Irène were to be found in this immobility of sleep. He who thought he had always so clung to life, with what eager attention he now listened to this counsel of silence, of repose, of destruction! At length he understood something which had long puzzled him: that just as a forest fire leaps from tree to tree so the longing for death is communicated by one individual to another, and that a man who kills himself kills not himself alone. And it occurred to Marcel that this death must be kept hidden from Marie Chavès. He had so much hoped that Irène might have been able to save Marie! She had promised Marie that her first visit, when she was allowed to go out, would be to the nursing-home at Saint-Cloud. But it was to be feared that the example which she had now given might prove to be more efficacious than any words. "See," the dead woman seemed to be saying to her friends, "see how easy it is! The weary heart asks nothing but to be allowed to rest." He must surround Marie in a conspiracy of silence; warn the servants and telephone this evening at latest to the nursing-home.

But Marcel himself knew now how simple this gesture of Irène's was; something which was being done every day by even the weakest of women, without bravado and in silence. For him the significance of Irène's death was inescapable; it would be with him all this coming night—and how many more!—while he lay beside a wife who, even sleeping, retained her enmity towards him; beside one who was perpetually on the defensive, withdrawn and fortified against him in defence of a secret to which she clung in ecstasy and terror. And even supposing that what he dreaded did not in fact exist at all, supposing that this cup was to be removed from him, what would be his plight? Already he was thirty-seven. Verdict had been passed: no talent. Before he had

really begun all was over. And if he no longer were loved, of what use was it to go on living?

The silence which brooded over the flat was broken by the sound of angry voices. The maid looked in to say that two undertakers, representing rival establishments, were squabbling outside. Hervé implored Marcel to see them and make whatever arrangements he thought fit. "I want things done properly. . . . And would you please see to the sending off of telegrams." He gave him a list of addresses in a whisper.

Hervé, left to himself, sat down again and closed his eyes. He tried to evoke within himself a feeling of remorse which actually he was far from experiencing. Or rather such remorse as he did feel was choked on the one hand by worries of which he felt ashamed and on the other by a vague hope which horrified him. He could not rid his mind of the thought of what this funeral and his state of mourning were going to deprive him that week: that rendezvous which was his dearest delight; the party on Tuesday at the American painter's. No doubt he would be able to resume his normal life very shortly. . . . It would be best to travel for the first six months; there was nothing to stop him doing so now; nothing to hold him back. No more excuses, lies. Had she made a will? He frowned: no, no, it was not right to think of that. He suppressed with an effort his hideous joy. So often had he foreseen this death that it now seemed to him that he was responsible for it, not because on a certain evening he had abandoned Irène in her need, but because of his prevision. Whatever he really wished for came to pass. It followed naturally that fulfilment should always crown his desire.

"Perhaps," he thought, "the only person in the world who really loved me; and then it was I who . . . But no, she was done for anyway. Whether it was tuberculosis or something else every doctor said she was bound to die. What sort of an existence would she have led if she had lived? She would rather have died than go

on living like that. She would never have thought of death had she not been so ill. In any case there is no question of suicide. An overdose of drugs taken in an attempt to deaden the pain. I don't come into it at all. If I had stayed with her last night . . . possibly she might have carried on for a few weeks more. Besides she was already half under with the stuff even while I was reading to her: she must have been dying then, and if for instance I had gone to bed in the ordinary way she would have died while I was asleep."

The sight of the corpse before him made him feel bolder: "She can no longer tell what I am feeling. She always had a way of guessing my thoughts, my lowest thoughts, and holding them up before me. Now she can no longer tell what I am feeling. Though as far as my feelings are concerned I am not free, even less so perhaps than I think. I do not yet fully realize that she is gone—a state of mind I've often read about in books. The comparable case of the soldier who does not find out all at once that he is wounded is always quoted. To get away from Mamma and that way she has of looking at me. I must let it be known that I am keeping to myself; that I don't want to see a soul. And, after all, is mine so bad a character? On the contrary, it's only that I see things as they are, clearly. . . . And yet . . . I am bad, horrible." And suddenly he caught a glimpse of himself as he was and tried desperately to find within him a vestige of probity as if for a fragment of clothing wherewith to cover his nakedness. By forcing himself to look at his dead wife he strove to squeeze out a semblance of grief. And at last some emotion, a trace of tender feeling, was perceptible. He felt sad and was comforted; to himself he no longer appeared to be quite so despicable; he had a sensation of judgment being passed upon him, the sort of judgment that Irène when yet alive had given, understanding yet without the least air of patronage. A strange and fleeting impression; Irène was there, she was saying to him: "I am watching you, unhappy

one, now that, left to your own devices, you are unable to be other than you are. . . ." His own wretchedness presented itself to him, but encircled, as it were, with an aura of compassion. In a flash it was gone, Marcel had come back and was saying to him: "It is fixed for to-morrow at eleven." "The day after to-morrow," thought Hervé, "at this time I will be through with it all."

He saw in his mind's eye the vastness of the Gare de Lyon at night, then sunrise over the olive trees; breakfast in the restaurant car; that inn, overlooking the deserted harbour, where he was known; all the enjoyment now so soon to be tasted. Then, turning his eyes away from the sight of the dead woman, he wept for himself, like a leper horrorstruck at the sight of his own hands.

XVIII

THE chapel was empty at this hour when the old lady made her way in. It was almost midday, but she knew that she would find him for whom she was looking. Sensing his presence rather than seeing him, she moved a chair up close to the confessional in order to attract his attention.

"Do not misunderstand me, Father: if there is anyone in this world on whom lies the blame for having lost a soul it is the unhappy woman who is speaking to you. You have often known me to cry because that poor child would judge religion according to the impression of it that she got from me. I didn't have even to open my mouth; the mere fact of my presence annoyed and irritated her, and everything that I did. Irène was so well read; she knew everything and could understand everything. While I did not know so much as the names even of those writers whom she regarded as her masters. You remember what she said one

day: 'Catholicism means my mother-in-law to me' . . . Hervé told me about it; he thought it funny. Father, you who have the tremendous consolation of being the means of saving so many souls, can you imagine anything more dreadful than having to say to oneself: by my presence alone I insult, make a mock of, and am a cause of ridicule to Him whom I love. Owing to me He is hated. I am the barrier between His love and a poor child who, in all probability, were it not for me would be won to Him. I am a caricature of everything that is most holy in this world. Ah! in spite of my stupidity I knew what she felt when she saw me. Surely hatred is a little thing when compared with downright contempt. And she despised Truth itself in the person of a poor old woman. I know; you will tell me again that I was not responsible; that it was my part to help her by means of prayer and penance. I did try to serve her in this way; I believe that I did my best. I held it to be a privilege granted to me that I was able to sense in her that temptation to seek death from which she suffered, and I watched over her. And having thus been warned and on the look-out I did not think there was any danger. Nor did I mind so much, for some time past, irritating her so long as I was able to keep an eye upon her. Also I said to myself that such things do not happen twice. Once was enough, with my husband (not counting my little Nadine who would have been thirty-seven to-day). It was enough, I thought, with my husband; as if I had not seen, too, close to my own circle four little ones belonging to my eldest sister dying one after the other. . . . But we are always apt to think that what happens to another can never happen to oneself. Father, I want you to understand without fail the nature of what I am confessing to you. I sometimes fear lest you do not take in perhaps the whole extent of my sins. First of all I rebelled; and that is not putting it strongly enough; I had a feeling of indignation. After so many tears and so much praying after so many Communions. . . . It seemed as if I were being

laughed at. I was angry with my victim; and I tell you I would not even go down on my knees beside her body! Yes, I avoided the dead body of this soul of the nature of whose eternal destiny I did not even dare to think. When I got home I shut myself in and holding back my blasphemous thoughts demanded to be shown the light. . . . Ah! Father, light indeed was vouchsafed but not of the kind I had expected. A terrible light! All of a sudden I saw, I understood the extent of my responsibility in this disaster. Till then I thought that at most I had been guilty of impoverishing the truth in the eyes of that poor child. But suddenly I realized this: That I had handed her over to my son; I had done all that I could do to bring about that marriage. Never once had I stopped to think, to ask myself whether he was worthy of her. And yet I knew . . . I knew. . . . What? What after all does a mother know about her son? But all of a sudden and quite clearly I saw. . . . I say this to you and to God alone. Alas, Father, as if all were permissible when our children's welfare is at stake! At all costs I wanted him to marry, and this girl, this stranger was able to ensure his happiness in this world at least and, for all I knew, in the next as well. But it was not that that I was thinking of. She was very rich and I was glad; all that I bothered to do was to reassure myself regarding the origins of her fortune—(for I yet had scruples, and you remember how one day I asked you whether it was not to be feared that the inventors of Kina Verley might have been responsible for an increase in drunkenness). After my husband's death you advised me to withdraw, to rid myself as much as possible of possessions. I had done that, as I believed, by giving to my son almost everything that I possessed,—though there is no hardship in passing on one's earthly hopes and desires to a beloved child! I was quite ruthless in my desire that he should be happy according to the standards of this world. What I wanted for Hervé was a girl who was more or less on her own, not too well hemmed in by family or relations. You know that Irène's

mother married again and now lives in London. The child lived here in Paris with an aunt who was most anxious to get her off her hands. She was the centre of attraction for every family that had a son to marry. The only reason for our hesitation was the father, Mr. Verley, that rich manufacturer—"who missed nothing," as Hervé used to say of him. I never made confession of the feeling of relief I had at his sudden death, though I did have Masses said for him, probably the only ones the poor man had. God help me! when I think of my saintly airs! of how I used to get up at five! and little enough it cost me! On to my son's back I had transferred all my own load of lustful desires. It was I who gave him counsels of prudence; told him how to behave and what to say; I who told him also what to avoid saying. It all seemed then to me to be quite natural; I lied perseveringly and convincingly. I denied, for instance, that my husband had committed suicide. Not once only but many times I repeated the story of a shooting accident which had been agreed upon in the family. And without the slightest feeling of remorse. But, you will ask, did not I confess my sinful behaviour? No, never; because what I was doing was on behalf of my boy. And yet in every respect he resembled his father. I can say no more; I cannot bear the thought of what I now know but the fact remains that I delivered an innocent child into his hands. And with my own hands I pushed her into a state of hopelessness and despair. I foisted my hateful concern for her welfare upon her. Every day she would see standing at her bedside this pitiless old woman, as if not content with ruining her here below I had taken it upon me as a sacred duty to make Our Lord Himself an object of loathing in her eyes. Father, I am on the brink of despair; I have already committed the only other crime that I could commit, for I am beyond hoping. How was it that I could have been accorded the grace of arriving in time? . . . For I did go there that evening. But it so happened that it was Hervé who opened the door. Once more I trusted Hervé, and

went away feeling reassured. I never have felt so serene and confident. Throughout that live-long night until death came to her in the morning, poor little one, she was left alone; I was not there . . .”

She repeated: “I was not there,” mechanically. She felt a soreness on her forehead where it had all this time been pressed against the grille. She tried to make out in the darkness the outline of that head with its thick white hair but she could see nothing except the bridge of the nose and a lowered eyelid. She had poured out the contents of her heart to the very dregs without receiving any help nor so much as a single word of encouragement or pity. He cannot find a word to say, she thought, saint though he be. What can he say? She waited patiently her condemnation.

“My daughter,” he said at last, and already a warmth of hope flowed into her. “My dear daughter,” the voice began again. She could see that the priest’s face was now for the first time turned towards her and that his hands were clasped together.

“Let us rejoice, my daughter.”

This intimation of joy fell with electrifying force upon the ears of the kneeling woman.

“I think . . . Perhaps I advance too quickly . . . but no. There was no need for you to have been at the bedside of this dying girl.”

Although the voice itself was low and muffled every syllable was pronounced with care.

“But, Father, you cannot have understood.”

In her stupefaction the poor woman forgot where she was and raised her voice; the priest interrupted her:

“I can only repeat in all humility what our Heavenly Father enjoins me to say to you, and it is this: ‘She was not there; but I was.’”

The words were spoken almost in a whisper. In her emotion the old lady with difficulty could listen to the accustomed

phrases which followed: "And in order that you may obtain all the grace of which you are in need you will say the Magnificat once every day this week."

She did not hear absolution being given and only rose from her knees at the sound of the shutter being lowered. As was her custom after going to confession she went and knelt down as close to the altar as she could, her mind filled with the thought of her penitence.

"My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour." She was unable to say any further and thereafter remained kneeling, with her face hidden in her hands, very still.

XIX

MARCEL, on his return from the funeral, which he had attended in the rain, was pleasantly surprised when Tota, in amiable tones, asked him whether he was not tired and expressed concern over the fact that he had not had time to have any luncheon. Were his feet wet? She went to look for his slippers. Marcel regarded her with all the more astonishment since they had parted in anger that very morning, Tota having refused point-blank to attend the funeral. "I didn't know her," she kept on repeating obstinately; "I only met her once in my life." "It ought to be enough for you that Irène was a friend of mine," he had protested in reply.

But she had affected to be unmoved by anything that concerned Marcel. "It is only necessary for me to like someone," he had said, "for you to dislike him. You go out of your way to emphasize any difference between us."

Far from defending herself, Tota had on the contrary been at

pains to justify her attitude in the very terms which she knew were best calculated to wound him. But now it was a completely altered Tota that he found on his return and more affectionate than he ever remembered her to have been since they first married. He was touched and took her in his arms. She suffered his embrace with passive complacency. "So she's no longer angry with her husband?" he asked. He noticed that she was wearing a dark dress with a turned-down collar and white cuffs. And it was then that he caught sight of her dressing-case lying open upon the bed. Tota, following the direction of his glance, anticipated his question. She was going away for a few days for a rest; she hoped that Marcel would agree that it was a good thing; just a few days to enable her to think things over. . . .

"To see what had best be done. . . . For me, . . . for both of us. I thought of going this evening, or to-morrow morning if you would rather."

"But where are you going? Not to La Hume?"

This was not the protest that she had expected. She had imagined that he would have cried out against the idea of leaving at all. But where did he want her to go, anyway?

"I don't care. Wherever you like. To Rambouillet, Fontainebleau; or better still to the Trianon at Versailles."

She protested however, that Versailles was too near; that he would visit her there, ring her up. Marcel appeared to accept the idea of her going away as something which, though bad in itself, was less bad than some other dread whose existence as a weight on his mind she suspected although she was quite unable to guess what it was.

"Very well then, what about the Midi? Villefranche, or somewhere like that? . . ."

But she did not like to think of his having to spend so much money on her account. He thanked her acidly for displaying so kindly a disposition towards himself.

"But anyway, Marcel, why not La Hume after all? It's six months now since I last saw my mother. . . . Father is confined to his room and will not even know I am there. I could see Alain. . . ."

"Alain was here less than a week ago."

She made no reply, feeling somewhat disconcerted at the turn the conversation had taken. Marcel stood with one hand on the radiator. He was making a tremendous effort to appear outwardly calm and collected.

"Surely you forget that you cannot possibly go back and live at La Hume. The atmosphere alone would stifle you. And things are worse there now than when you came away; your mother increasingly at the beck and call of a sick man who becomes madder every day. You've told me many times what it is like down there in winter: the mud which you cannot get off your shoes, the dampness of a house whose walls are full of cracks and crusted with sea-salt, the station seven miles off and no means of getting there. . . . I was never under any illusion, or at least I am under none now, as to why you married me: it was precisely in order to get away from La Hume."

Although she realised that she ought to have protested against the statement she contented herself with an undefined gesture of denial.

"Never mind about the money," he went on. "I'll raise that. In any case I know of places in the Midi where living is cheap enough. When I was down there . . ."

"No, no: can you imagine me all by myself in some minute hotel?"

With studied indifference and as if to himself he said:

"Now if Alain could go with you. . . ."

"Ah! Now that would be fun! Do you think he would? I doubt it. He would hardly like to leave mamma so soon after getting back from here. And then, he probably couldn't afford it anyway."

In the same pinched voice, Marcel remarked that after all if it were only Alain's company she wanted she could enjoy it equally well at La Hume.

"But of course," she cried, her face lighting up with pleasure; "I didn't like to say as much for you seem to think that he has a bad influence on me. . . . I wish you could have heard all the good advice he gave me."

And upon Marcel enquiring whether they had talked much about him she assured him that they had scarcely talked of anything else, "and," she added, "in a way of which you would have approved, I am quite sure."

Marcel said nothing. He was looking thoughtfully out of the window at the gloomy fronts of the houses opposite. Tota decided that as he appeared to have calmed down, now was the time when she could slip away and get on with her packing. But still she was conscious of a feeling of profound uneasiness. What was the matter with him? Perhaps he feared that she might be leaving him for good? Anxious to relieve his feelings, therefore, she promised him that she would not be away for more than three weeks. But he merely shrugged his shoulders. So it was not that that was worrying him. Plainly he would not have minded her being away for an even longer time so long as she had been going to some place other than La Hume.

"At this time of year," he said presently, "I suppose Alain has not a great deal to do; you would be able to spend plenty of time. . . ."

But, on the contrary, she assured him that in the month of February Alain had a lot to do among the vines.

"But of course there are always the evenings," he added.

"Ah!" she said, and she remarked that he swallowed painfully as if he had a sore throat.

"In the evenings," he persisted, "when your work is over you can have those secret dinners together after your mother has gone upstairs to bed. . . ."

"I don't expect we'll have any secret dinners," Tota said, laughingly.

But seeing Marcel's gaze upon her she stopped laughing suddenly.

"Why this funereal air?" she said, "I shall be there and back in no time."

She lit the lamp, but he quickly turned his face away from her towards the wall, saying that he could not bear it as it hurt his eyes. Not a little surprised she turned it out again.

"I prefer to talk in the dark," he added. "There are some things which are more easily said when one cannot see one another."

Tota merely remarked that she personally hated the dark; but she did not dare to put the light on again. She could not make out the expression on the face opposite to her which was now only a pale smudge in the shadows, motionless, and of indistinguishable features. She was afraid of this man; afraid of what he might do or say. Unconsciously she began to search about for some loophole of escape.

"Let us get things straight. When I get back everything will be simpler. It must be. . . . But did I tell you that there are some letters for you on the table, and a telegram? You no longer pay attention to anything. . . . What are you thinking about?"

"No, stay here a minute. I was thinking of Alain," he replied, slowly and thoughtfully. "It is odd, don't you think, that a boy of twenty like him should take so little interest in women?"

"But how do you know? What do either of us know?" she said, irritably.

However, he stated that she would have been in any case the first to know of anything, even the smallest affair, had there been anything of the kind to know.

"And why should I have known?"

He noticed an alteration in the tone of her voice. She went on:

"I don't think that a man like you can altogether understand someone like Alain. I suppose that you imagine . . ."

"Yes, what do you suppose I imagine?" he interrupted, a note of anguish in his voice.

"Well, I suppose, that he is unnatural, a monster; one of those creatures you are always talking about."

"Ah! I see." He was clearly relieved. "No, no. I don't doubt but that Alain is perfectly capable . . ."

"In any case," she said, reassured, "the poor boy is scarcely twenty. Maybe he is young for his age but in other directions he is so grown-up and has no end of commonsense. There is something reserved, something preserved about him . . ."

"Preserved from what? Reserved for whom?"

Tota was unable to rely. She could hear that her husband was laughing although by now she could hardly see him. She had an ugly feeling of being threatened by something. That she was about to be struck down by a stroke from the void. Without pausing to think what she was doing she turned up the light. Marcel put his hand before his eyes protesting that he couldn't stand it. When, however, he removed his hand Tota remained dumb with astonishment before the agonised expression of countenance that this movement revealed. She felt she was looking for the first time at this face which Marie Chavès and many another woman must have known so well and even now remembered in their dreams. He was muttering something of which Tota could not catch the sense: actually he was saying that Alain had no more use for women than he had for men:

"A husband of course is another matter. You were devilish lucky to find me . . ."

She did not understand but started to edge towards the door as if this man standing there before her had been somehow invested with supernatural powers. It was not that she thought that he would strike her, nevertheless she could not help feeling that her

guard was open and that she was exposed to a deadly thrust straight to the heart which might come at any moment. In her extremity her thoughts flew to Alain and almost unconsciously her lips formed his name.

"There!" he cried, in a voice which she scarcely recognised as his. "You see! You call out for *him*! But I am frightening you. . . . Tota darling, you aren't frightened of me?"

The expression on his face was one of anguish. Controlling himself with obvious effort, he continued more gently:

"I don't blame you, for it is not your fault. No, it isn't that I blame you at all. I can picture it all so well—your childhood, you growing up in that God-forsaken hole of dust or of mud according to the season. Don't I know them, those little estates buried in the depths of the country, more lonely and isolated than any rock in the middle of the Pacific; and your mother, slaving her life out for that wicked old man whose only use so far as you were concerned was to provide you with the fun of struggling to live your own lives in spite of him. The mere fact of his existence is no doubt sufficient explanation of the close ties uniting the rest of the family without taking into account all the other things: the wide and comfortable fireplace in the kitchen round which you would crouch in the winter; and for the dog-days that old stuffed sofa in the billiard-room about which you used to talk so much at Cauterets. . . ."

"Yes indeed," interrupted Tota, who was beginning to feel reassured, "we used to play on that sofa often when we were small; and later on it was there that Alain used to read aloud to me. . . ."

She stopped abruptly. The expression on Marcel's face alarmed her. What was he getting at? She protested that she did not understand what he was talking about.

"But you do understand," he retorted vehemently, "for as I was speaking I could see that you were shaking your head in denial. It is just possible that you acted in all innocence. Maybe

nothing happened at all. I am ready to believe it, . . . to be sure of it. . . . But . . ."

He paused, noticing that Tota was laughing.

"At last," she said, "I think I understand. No wonder it took me some time. What a fellow you are!" she added contemptuously. "So that's what the trouble is!"

She walked across to the sofa and sat down, her elbows on her knees, her face in her hands. Marcel could not make out whether she was laughing or crying. He went up to her and made as though he would kiss her, but she pushed him away.

Far from experiencing any feeling of resentment he was profoundly relieved to note the signs of disgust and revolt which his words had evoked. No, now there was no longer room for doubt: that nightmare had been of his own creation. It was evident that Tota in her attitude of complete bewilderment was not acting a part. And many must have been the guesses that she had made before the first inkling of the degrading truth had dawned on her! And even then she had laughed, so hopelessly unreal and ridiculous had the thing appeared. At any rate so far as he was concerned he could once more draw breath freely: "She will hate me now, but it can't be helped! My mind is at rest. All I have to do now is to think how I can win her love for myself. The ground is cleared. We must start again from the beginning." The old obsession was fading away but in the process was beginning to reveal a number of yet older troubles which it had hitherto served to conceal. 'What,' he thought, 'if I were to act a part? The jealous husband, for example? She will see that I am still to be reckoned with.'

Tota was arranging her hair in front of the glass. Presently she picked up a book and left the room, nor could he summon up courage to follow her. He could hear her turning over the pages. But now the fact that he was not actually with her no longer seemed to matter. It was happiness enough for him to have re-

gained his peace of mind. Every sufferer from jealousy knows well the blessed relief, the inward peace, which comes the moment that the torture is relaxed. So it was not true! It had never, now he came to think of it, even borne the semblance of truth! How could he ever have believed it? And when was it that he had first begun to foster the idea? The evening when she had gone to meet Alain at the station and Hervé had called. . . . Was it possible that Hervé's wretched insinuations could alone have sufficed to unleash in him this madness? Surely not. He had been all too ready to receive them. All that Hervé had done had been to bring out something which had lacked only an opportunity to appear. But enough of that! His sufferings were now ended and he must begin again. But the question was how?

Marcel had to admit that he had never put himself out to any great extent to win the love of others. He was not accustomed to being the one to suffer in any partnership, being by nature a hammer rather than an anvil. He was conscious, ever since the advent of Tota into his life, of having to play a part to which he was ill-suited. All that must be changed now. There was, he decided, no room for doubt; a change must be made and that without further delay. To begin with they must separate. A few weeks of La Hume might well be enough: the cold, the mud, the dripping alleyways, the damp wallpapers, the salt-sticky walls, the dark afternoons, the long interminable evenings, the ever-present smell of illness, the cries of the sick man heard in the dawn. . . . "She will soon come to regret our bed here, her dresses, dancing, drinking. . . ." he thought to himself.

Marcel pushed open the half opened door. By the light of a lamp by the sofa he could make out the line of Tota's figure as she lay half turned towards the wall with her face hidden from him. He bent over her and kissed her; but she being taken by surprise, as she had not heard him come in, pushed him from her with

one hand without turning round. Without disclosing any trace of annoyance in his voice he merely said:

"Is it too much to hope that we should both behave like reasonable beings at the same time? I agree that it is your turn to be unreasonable, and for myself I confess I am at a loss to explain my madness of a short time ago. I'd rather not think of it, and I swear I'll never mention it again. Kiss me."

But still she would not let him.

"Tota! Can't you even look at me?"

As her face was buried in a cushion and she spoke in a low voice he could not hear what her reply was but he thought he caught the word "horror." He stepped back to where he could more easily take in the picture of this prostrate figure before him shaken by convulsive sobs. The right shoulder, a little too thin for beauty, was raised. Yet how he loved that slender neck which, seen from the back, as now, was so like a child's! One leg was bent, the other stretched out straight;—too developed a leg, which hardly seemed to belong to that body,—an ugly leg in fact, according to the canons of modern taste. But Marcel, who only demanded fineness in ankle and knee, never failed to be attracted by the suggestion of hidden strength that emanated from Tota. And now the thought of her leaving him, of this imminent separation, began to worry him, although he was ready to admit that it was infinitely preferable to suffer for some known and definite reason than on account of a mere nightmare. It seemed then as if he was likely to be deprived of his wife's company for, it might be, several weeks. But on no account must he show that he minded. He offered to book her a seat on the *Sud Express* for the next day.

"The train leaves at about one o'clock. I think after all that you were quite right in deciding to go. . . . There you are, you see how reasonable I've become."

As she still kept her face hidden and said nothing he asked

whether he could bring her trunk out for her or whether she would do with her suit-cases. To which, without looking up, she said:

"I'm not going."

"But I've said that I think it right of you to go."

She repeated that she intended to stay now. Laughing, he accused her of being nothing but a headstrong and sulky little girl; an obstinate little pig; and taking her by the shoulders he attempted to make her look at him. But she struggled fiercely and he drew back before her tear-stained and angry face.

"Now I shall never be able to go back to La Hume, never," she said. She was sitting on the edge of the sofa, erect, and staring in front of her distractedly.

"Dreadful, dreadful!" she muttered.

"But, darling, seeing that it wasn't true . . ."

As she did not answer he thought that she had not heard him and repeated:

"But since it isn't true . . ."

This time she turned her head and looked at him with a detached stare and he could no longer be in any doubt as to whether she had heard him.

"You know quite well that it isn't true."

And now he could feel the agony beginning again. It was rising like a tide within and around him. Surely, surely Tota would say something, make a gesture, burst out laughing. Yes if only she would laugh it would be all right.

But she neither laughed nor spoke, a prey to this sudden revelation of her past life, a life the full import of which seemed to have come upon her only this evening and of which she was now perhaps in possession of the key—if it were the real key. That she was innocent alike in thought and deed of course she knew, but beyond either thought or deed, hidden and nameless within her inmost subconsciousness, there remained something which, it

seemed to her, had possibly now for the first time been given a name. Definition had called it into being. Had it been she and not Irène who had died yesterday it would never even have existed. But the soundless repetition of two syllables was in itself enough to evoke, in all its shameful majesty, the shade of that passion which strikes terror to the hearts of men. Nevertheless, that power of darkness whose particular delight it is to defile and poison the very wellsprings of our heart, on this occasion over-shot itself. Tota shook her head, holding out her hands in a gesture of self-defence:

"But this is madness," she ejaculated. "What am I thinking of! Of course it isn't true."

Now she was laughing, but not in the way that Marcel had hoped: there was a suppliant tone in her voice, as if she were anxious to be reassured. Marcel, plainly, ought now to have said without further ado that here was a monster of his own creation before which they were trembling like two savages before the obscene image of some god which they themselves had rudely hewn out of a block of wood.

"Think as I will," she said, "I cannot recall a single scene, word or gesture which could . . . I swear it," she added, bursting into tears.

"So, you see; you have to think! That's what worries me, Tota; that you cannot give me a direct denial, but have to think back, to consider . . ."

He sat down beside her and took her hand. She made no effort to withdraw it for she was no longer thinking of him.

It was true, she thought to herself, that Alain, for a young man, was painfully shy. These are the sort of things which I would not care to tell anyone and which certainly no one here would understand. But it is true that he never would come into my room, for example; nor did he like me coming into his. And when I used to bathe, that part of the river-bank where I was would be forbidden ground for everyone. . . .

"Yes? What were you going to say?"

"I? Nothing."

Marcel refrained with difficulty from asking the question which was upon the tip of his tongue: "What was it that Alain was so afraid of?" She understood but said nothing. So they remained seated side by side, each one lost in his own thoughts.

Marcel lit a cigarette and continued to smoke absorbedly. His thoughts turned to Irène now at rest. Such was indeed the only answer that she could have given him. When one reaches the bitter end to lie down and sleep. But Irène, unlike himself, had never been bound to life by definable bonds of appetites or desires. She had never known what real pleasure was.

"It isn't true," Tota was repeating to herself. "I know that it isn't true. I don't have to prove it."

Their reveries were interrupted by the sound of rattling plates. Marcel said nervously:

"Don't let us have dinner here."

Without answering him directly Tota went to the door and called out to the girl telling her not to lay the table.

"Then you won't go to-morrow, Tota?"

No, she would send a telegram.

He asked her whether Alain was expecting her; she admitted that she had sent him a telegram that afternoon.

"And now," she said, "I'm going to dress. What about you?"

He also would dress; no, a dinner-jacket, not a tail coat. They would do a regular round of night-clubs.

Tota was thinking of William. If only he were free to-night! She would ring him up and tell him that he must chuck whatever other engagement he might have. They would dance till they dropped. She would wear her red dress which always brought her luck, in spite of the fact that it needed cleaning and was not cut low enough at the back. When all was said she was glad she was not going away: she would have died of boredom at La Hume.

She went back into the room where Marcel was still smoking, stretched out at full length on the divan:

"Do you know, I'm glad I'm not going. I would have been bored to tears at home."

He breathed again; this was what he had been waiting for; this was the sort of attitude on Tota's part which gave him real pleasure. He did not dare to count on this respite being of long duration, but for this night at least he knew where to look for relief; none of your filthy champagne or cocktails:—whisky.

Then after reflecting for a few moments he said:

"But, darling; the very evening after Irène's funeral . . . ?"

She looked at him with astonishment:

"All the more reason," she said.

"Yes, quite true; all the more reason."

XX

AFTER the last spadeful of earth had been thrown into the grave, and the last hand-shake given, Hervé, seated beside his mother, who was veiled in black crepe, in the car realized that the worst ordeal was yet to come. He would have to face that look in his mother's eyes that he had first seen on the day of Irène's death, that look so implacable, so terrifying, that the sight of Irène's dead body had seemed to him to be less alarming. The only word she had addressed to him since had been to ask him to come and sleep the night at the apartment in the rue Las-Cases. So there was the prospect of a whole evening to get through under her eye!

In vain he tried to obtain a glimpse of her face through the heavy veil. All that he could make out was an impression of that same impenetrable reserve which had so frightened him before:

no tears or signs of grief nor the least indication of disturbance. Thus, seated in silence in the interior of the car, it was of his mother rather than of his dead wife that Hervé was thinking. In any case what did it matter? the less that remained to him the freer he would be. Whatever—and it was little enough in all conscience!—he had hitherto deliberately refrained from doing in order to please his mother was now, he felt, open for exploitation. He would know how to profit from this misfortune as from any other. The road was clear; the old lady had removed herself of her own accord and would no longer be a barrier in his way. But why had she asked him to spend the night in the rue Las-Cases? Perhaps she was afraid lest this very night he would resume the interrupted routine of his hidden life. As he climbed the stairs alone (he had left his mother to go up by the lift) he laughed to himself. No, she need not get fussed; to-night at any rate he would behave like a good little boy. For now there was no need to hurry; he had plenty of time.

She was waiting for him on the landing and opened the door of the flat. Her hand shook so that she could scarcely find the key-hole. He followed her into the room. One window was open and outside a bird was singing after the rain as if it had been April instead of merely late February. Hervé stood, looking out on the dreary little court-yard in the centre of the building, having made up his mind to maintain an attitude of detachment and as far as was possible complete indifference.

“Hervé!”

He turned round. Madame de Blénaugé had thrown back her veil and stood there, slightly out of breath, smiling at him. He smiled back. This, he decided, was no longer someone who was determined to pass judgment on him, yet he felt it was not quite the mother whom he used to know. As he looked at the worn face, the thin nose and bluish lips it struck him that it would not be very long before she too was dead; only a matter of days, per-

haps, or even hours. She gave him her hand and he held it in both his own—a poor deformed hand, twisted with rheumatism.

Again she uttered his name. She did not weep, hardly gave an impression of suffering at all. Indeed the aged face bore an expression of such happy serenity that Hervé's first thought was that his mother had lost her reason.

"My dear boy," she said.

Therein was all the reassurance that he required. And, of a sudden, that which nothing hitherto, neither shame, nor the horrors attendant on his return home, nor his vigil by Irène's body, nor the funeral rites, nor even the interment had succeeded in doing, this simple expression did;—his heart overflowed and his head found again its childhood's refuge on his mother's shoulder. There was no need to worry about wetting her neck with his tears or spoiling her dress; no need to feel ashamed of grimacing and sniffing after the manner of a small boy. Once more he was ten years old and was not to blame. She was able to see through that outer covering of secret shortcomings to the core of him beneath where he was just as he had been as a little boy. Even in the lowest of men there remains always a residue of purity, provided there is a mother to draw it out. "Cry, then," she kept on repeating. "Cry, then." But she herself did not cry. With one hand she held that bowed head to her shoulder while her eyes through the window were fixed on the veiled blue of the sky above the court-yard. It must be later than she thought; for the days were beginning to draw out. Thus they remained, the two of them, for some minutes in silence; then she felt the head upon her shoulder being withdrawn. Hervé rose to his feet and stood dabbing his eyes with a handkerchief. She called him but as he made no movement she went up to him and attempted to draw him to her, but he resisted her.

"Mamma," he said; "you don't understand."

"My silly boy!"

In the same tone of voice as she had been wont to use in cajoling him as a child she added:

"Hervé, come, look me in the eyes."

But still he turned away his head and painfully stammered out his confession: she did not know, he said, that he had promised Irène that evening that he would stay with her; that he had broken his promise; that if he had stayed . . . As his mother said nothing Hervé thought that at last she had understood. He wished that now she would say to him: Darling, look at me. But no. Doubtless she could not bring herself to do it; dared not. He glanced swiftly at her and was astonished to see that there was a smile on her lips and that she was nodding her head. Was it possible that she had not heard? And once more the suspicion gained upon him that she was mad, a suspicion which was in no way allayed when presently she said: "What does it signify after all? It does not matter. . . . All is well. All is for the best." And suddenly in an access of joy which lifted her head and gave her back for a fleeting moment the poise and attraction of youth (as in the days when she had appeared so tall and stately to her small son) she said:

"My dearest, if only you knew how greatly loved we are."

This time he understood. His mother's old obsession still persisted in spite of everything. He would have done better, he knew, to have held his tongue, but he could not: this was too much to be borne! Roughly he pushed aside the arms which even now were seeking to encircle his shoulder and in a tone of annoyance which he did not attempt to conceal said:

"No, no! For pity's sake don't say that to me." Then lowering his voice he went on: "How can you possibly understand? I wanted to tell you that I could not . . . (Bah! never mind: now he would speak out . . .). It is only because you are so innocent that you believe that everything is for the best. It would be bad

enough if that were all—ugliness, loneliness, unhappiness, illness and at the end of it all, death; but there is more to it than that. You go on praying and praying, but you don't even suspect the existence of the gulf wherein those, maybe, who are nearest and dearest to you are struggling for dear life. It isn't their fault that they are there; they never wanted to be there; they detest it. But before ever they were born they were predestined for it. Already then they were yelling from the lowest depth; already they were sunk in the mud and the filth up to their chins, even while they did not yet know where they had got to or what sort of thing mud was. But of what use is it for me to talk like this to you? Better to forget it, and not even try to understand. It doesn't mean much anyway."

She did not appear to be greatly moved by this outburst. In the fading light she could see the outline of her son where he sat huddled in his low-seated chair, his head bent over his joined knees. He himself could hear his mother's breath coming and going but he hardly expected her to make any reply, for it seemed to him that there was no reply possible. All the more was he taken by surprise then when he heard her beginning to speak in her quiet voice. As if she were relating a well known and generally acknowledged fact she said that after all he himself, Hervé, had been the recipient of at least one remarkable instance of Divine favour.

"What, I?"

"Yes. The greatest of all, in that you can see yourself and know yourself as you are. You spoke of the mud, but you called it by its proper name, you knew it for what it is."

"Yes," he said gently and as if in spite of himself; "yes, yes; I know."

He felt no trace of anger. He was glad he had spoken even although he doubted whether his mother had grasped his meaning. She asked him to come and sit by her. He went and once

more hid his face on her shoulder. His mother was speaking of Irène; she affirmed that "the poor child had fallen asleep in the Lord" and that she herself had received an assurance to that effect. Dreams, he thought to himself, but he did not attempt to repel the soothing effect that her words and voice afforded him. A corner of the sky was reflected in the mirror facing him. The familiar room, darkening with the shades of evening, had withdrawn into the past. This black dress against which his forehead was pressed seemed to be impregnated with his childhood's tears. Perhaps, he thought, if Irène could hear his mother's words now she would mitigate her old disdain. What was that she was saying? He forced himself to listen: "Any sufferer who can see his sores must want to be made whole again. And if there should have been in this world once a promise of cure made and if it should appear that that promise had never once failed to be kept . . ." Hervé surrendered himself to the soothing flow of words just as, long ago, he used to do when his mother would carry him as a sleepy child to his room, undress him by the light of a candle and warm his feet for him by rubbing them with her hands.

She was speaking of Irene. Irène, she was saying, knows everything now:

"Her eyes are seeing now that which I shall see very soon, my child. Yes, before this year is out . . ."

To all Hervé's protestations she would only repeat that she knew that her hour was at hand. And so impressed was he by her air of calm assurance that he could find no word to say. He merely rose to his feet and turning on the light stared as if for the first and the last time at the worn face of this his mother who was yet alive.

XXI

THUS in peace and quietness the afternoon slipped away. And during the light meal that they shared on a table by the fire, and even up till eleven o'clock, Hervé was convinced that he had become a new man. He had already kissed his mother goodnight and was on the point of going off to bed when the servant came in to say that a lady wished to speak to him on the telephone. No sooner had he picked up the receiver than he recognised Marie Chavès's voice.

"I apologise, Hervé, but . . . your wife? Is she . . . How is she getting on?"

"All right," Hervé said listlessly. He could hear her draw a deep breath of relief.

"Ah! I am so glad."

She told him that she was speaking from a café whither she had managed to get thanks to the goodwill of one of the nurses; there was, she added, a regular conspiracy afoot to prevent her from telephoning. She had first rung up Marcel but the girl there had replied so strangely to her questions about Irène that had she not found out that Marcel and his wife were dining out at a restaurant and were not expected back until late she would have been quite out of her mind with anxiety.

At this unexpected news Hervé could not suppress a feeling of deep satisfaction. So Marcel was capable of doing that on the very day of a friend's funeral; nothing must stand in the way, even for a moment, of the round of enjoyment. Marcel for all his patronizing airs is no better than I, he thought.

Marie Chavès apologised for telephoning to Hervé at the risk of waking up the patient, but she had been rather worried at the unwillingness of the maid to say how her mistress was. She had said she did not know how she was.

"In fact she told me I had better speak to you and that you were dining with your mother. The way she said it made me nervous. It was stupid of me, I know. But I need not tell you how fond I am of Irène. . . . So you promise that all is well?"

As in a flash he saw quite clearly that he must not hesitate. All that he had to say was: "You may rest assured; everything is all right." But Hervé did not, could not bring himself to say it. He, to whom lying was second nature, when it came to a moment like this was unable to lie. Truth simply oozed out of him at every pore when the truth in question was fatal to whomsoever was to hear it.

Marie went on:

"I am sorry to be so insistent, but there is something odd about your voice, something hesitant. Surely nothing could have happened so suddenly? Unless . . . She is a very strong-minded woman . . . Hullo, hullo! Are you there?"

"My poor Marie," he said, almost in a whisper; and then: "We are unhappy indeed."

He heard her exclaim:

"No, it can't be true! The very first time she is allowed out she is coming here to see me. She promised me. Some time this week. . . ."

If there had been an accident why hadn't someone told her? She clearly hardly dared to give a name to the suspicion which haunted her. Hervé at that moment felt a twinge of that jealousy which he had always felt when he heard someone praising Irène. Was it possible that so pitiable a jealousy had survived her death? Then as Marie Chavès repeated: "The only really strong woman I ever knew," he interrupted her, saying sourly: "We are weak enough, every one of us."

He could hear what sounded to him like a stifled cry.

"No, Marie," he continued. "You don't understand. She never meant to; it was an accident. The pain was too much and

she took some sedative cachets; she had been increasing the dose most unwisely without realising . . . Marie, answer me; are you there?"

No answer. Hervé hung up the receiver. He stood for a moment motionless, half way across the dusty room, in the stillness of the sleeping apartment. What was this that he had done? This evil force which emanated from him almost without his being aware of it, which could strike with such shattering effect, always left him in a state of complete and utter exhaustion. He must first of all warn Marcel at all costs. The question was where to find him at this hour. He looked up the number of the night-club in the telephone book. He could hear a buzz of voices and now and then the wail of a saxophone whenever the cloakroom door was opened. He was told that Marcel had indeed got there.

Hervé had no hesitation in placing all responsibility for the indiscretion on the servants. He heard Marcel swear and then thank him for having taken the trouble to warn him, especially at such a time when his mind might so well have been taken up with other matters. Then when he said that he must telephone to Saint-Cloud:

"No, no, Marcel, old boy, you've got your car, haven't you? Well then you must be off there yourself without wasting another minute: it may well be that it is a question of minutes."

Marcel was slightly surprised at this solicitude on the part of Hervé; he really seemed to be quite upset! There was, after all, he thought, something engaging about Hervé. And moreover he was right; it would be wise to be off at once. Marcel had only just started his evening and had hardly had any drink as yet. It was no joke having to take up life's burden like this after such a day and particularly after that scene with Tota. Marie Chavès . . . A trifle unexpected, her reappearance at this moment! But it couldn't be helped, he must go: Irène would have approved his going, and it must never be said that Irène was the cause, even the

involuntary cause, of a second tragedy. He made his way back through the crowded dancers. No one paid the slightest attention to his haggard expression, the result of all that he had been through that day.

"No," Tota cried angrily. "Here we are, just arrived and you say you must go. Very well then, go if you like."

And as he implored her to speak a little lower she said:

"Be off then: William will see me home. Would you mind, William?"

No, indeed William would not mind. He blushed a little and threw a covert glance at the husband who appeared to be perfectly indifferent to the suggestion. Marcel, he thought, did not take him seriously; he looked on him as harmless; but he was wrong and he would show him how wrong he was this very night. Yes, he repeated to himself, before this night was out he would show him. He himself he had never felt better than he did now. For some days past he had been disciplining himself, taking the stuff in ever diminishing quantities. . . . All right then, now was the time. As often as not desire in him failed to coincide with opportunity. Moreover this evening Tota seemed to him to be particularly defenceless.

As soon as Marcel had left them they felt ill at ease. William, when they were not dancing, no longer sat himself down next to Tota, but opposite to her, from which point of vantage he continued to regard her with sombre and preoccupied detachment. The strain of waiting gave to that young but dissipated face a serious and almost grave expression. Had he been able to put his thoughts into words he would have said that while he did not attach much importance to what he was about to do yet inwardly he had a sense of being about to undertake something of momentous consequence. He no longer felt any desire either to drink or to dance. Idly he picked up the wine-list and was put to shame by the shakiness of his drunkard's hands.

Tota, leaning her head back against the wall, stared vaguely before her and smoked. He could see by the movement of her lips that she was talking to herself and tried to catch what she was saying:

"What isn't true, Tota? But yes, I heard you: you were saying over and over again: It isn't true; I know that it isn't true. Well, what isn't?"

With her elbow on the table she looked fixedly at him. Again he said:

"Tell me, what is it that isn't true?"

She beckoned him forward; she didn't want to be overheard. Each was now able to study in minute detail the features of the other. Tota beheld a chin which needed shaving; heavy, reddened eyelids half covering eyes that were of a burning intensity with dark circles beneath them, and a loose mouth hanging open. And he saw before him a mouth which revealed teeth which were good but irregular, a slightly yellowish forehead, rather hollow cheeks rouged without sufficient care, thinnish shoulders and tear-filled eyes which were those of a little girl.

"What is true," she said under her breath, "what is true is that I love you."

He shook his head. No, he said; he did not believe her. She asked him why.

"Because of what you were saying to yourself just now; because it isn't true."

As she made no reply he suggested that it was time to go.

"I'll go now," he said: "meet me in the car when you're ready."

In the car, seated next to William who was driving, she said:

"It's curious, but I know nothing about you, your parents, your childhood. And I never stop talking about La Hume and Alain. You might be the son of . . . well . . . of a convict for all I know."

He laughed and said that he did not care much about discussing his parents but volunteered a few bare details: of English origin; connected with a firm at Havre selling coffee and cocoa; dreadful people. . . . His childhood? School, holidays at Dinard. . . . She interrupted him irritably:

"Yes, yes, I know. You have already told me all that. Actually I believe you've got nothing to tell. That's not a real childhood."

She inclined to despise people who had no country background.

"Where are we?" she asked. "This isn't the direction of the river."

"It's the boulevard Haussmann. Here we are."

"But we're not going to your place, William?"

"Yes we are," he said under his breath. "I want to, and so do you."

He put his left arm along the back of the seat behind her shoulder.

"But you're trembling, my darling. Why?"

He tried to kiss her but she turned her head away so that he was only able to brush a wet and salty cheek with his lips.

"No," she implored, "no, no!"

"All right, dearest, I am not a brute. . . . Let's call it off for to-night, that's all."

Then she leaned against him trustfully, and the whole way to the rue Vaneau she remained with her head lying on his shoulder. Now and then he felt her shuddering like a child quietening down after a bout of weeping.

"Here you are, Tota."

She got out and looked at William.

It's too silly, she said to herself. I don't know what came over me. What on earth did I behave like that for?

There was no trace to be seen of the harassed little girl except the red eyes and the wet cheeks. William looked with astonishment at the disillusioned woman before him.

"Any way," he muttered, "the next time . . ."

XXII

SHE had just got into bed by the time that Marcel returned. "It was just as well," he said, "that I went to Saint-Cloud. There was a terrible scene going on when I arrived and my presence had a calming effect. But only at a price. The doctor says that Marie must have a change of climate and she will only agree to go down to the Midi if I go with her and remain with her for a fortnight. What was I to do? I agreed to go, but it is the most awful bore."

He glanced at Tota lying in the bed. She also was watching him through her eye-lashes.

"I must say," she remarked presently, "it's just too good to be true. It looks as if you were turning over a new leaf altogether."

He shrugged his shoulders. It was not a question of being kind, he said; merely so that should any misfortune occur he might not feel that he had been in any way to blame. He did not think fit to add that he wished to do what he felt sure that Irène would have approved of his doing had she been still alive. There was a perceptible pause and then he said:

"I need not add that of course there will be nothing . . . I mean that nothing could take place between this poor—er—old woman, ill as she is, and myself. . . ."

"Why old?" Tota exclaimed truculently. "I would hardly call her that. But if that forms part of the prescribed cure and if you yourself are pining to be off don't let me stand in your way."

He controlled himself with an effort.

"I don't think I am asking a great deal. But I promise you one thing, I never expected that you would be jealous."

"Nor I, it would seem. For you are going to leave me for a

fortnight and I take it you are not the least nervous on my account?"

She was half sitting up now and he thought he could read in her expression a touch of mockery. She was thinking of William, of what was now going to happen, of that which was now bound to happen some time in the course of these two weeks.

"It strikes me as being funny," she continued. "So you aren't in the least apprehensive."

"No, not of *that*."

He looked at her straight in the eyes.

"Ah!" she said; "yes, I forgot. . . ."

The shadow of Alain lay between them. He noticed that the bantering tone had gone out of her voice now.

"Hurry up, Marcel, and get undressed. There you stand mooning; it is almost two o'clock and we have had a tiring day. . . ."

"Yes," he said, "a tiring day."

He was in bed and had turned out the light. He imagined that she was already asleep. But suddenly she spoke:

"Among us all only she knows peace."

"Who, darling?"

"Irène, of course."

"Ah! Irène," he said; and then: "What is the matter with us all that we should be so enamoured of death!"

XXIII

TOTA dressed slowly. William was certain to be late as usual and would hardly turn up much before nine o'clock. Although it was over a week since Marcel had left, this was the first evening that she and William would have

spent together, he having disappeared altogether for several days, engaged no doubt in "beating it up" as he himself expressed it.

Tota had not in the least minded being alone. She knew very few people and did not encourage advances from strangers, for she was inclined to be on her guard and suspicious, fearing that she would be laughed at on account of her provincial ways and accent.

And above all she felt no desire to see anyone because no one here had known her and Alain in the old days at La Hume. Who then among all these people could possibly have helped her, could have given her any useful information to assist her in the examination she was making of her own childhood and past youth? It absorbed her, this meticulous search which revealed so many forgotten memories, opened up so many long closed paths, and brought to light so many hidden signs. It was less painful, however, than exhausting. It was not that she suffered so much as that she was worn out. Had proof of it been wanted she had only to look in a mirror where her drawn features gave the impression of someone who was exhausted at the end of a long day's march.

It had, however, been necessary to pay a visit of condolence to Hervé. Marcel, in order to encourage her, had assured her that it was a pure formality and that she would not have to go in. But greatly to her astonishment she had been shown in to the room where the old lady, whom she scarcely knew, was lying apparently seriously ill. Hervé, seated at her bedside, could hardly take his eyes away from his mother's grey face and those blue eyes of hers as wide open and innocent as those of a child. Marcel used always to scoff at Hervé's devotion to his mother: that kind, he would say, invariably dote upon their mummies. But Tota had been impressed by the absorbed care which he had lavished on the sick woman, to such an extent, in fact, that he had paid very little attention to his visitor. The old lady said to Tota,

speaking slowly like one who has had a slight stroke, that Irène had thought a great deal of Marcel and had often spoken of him. The younger woman had replied a trifle foolishly and in a bantering tone to the effect that all the same she feared that Marcel was of no great worth. "We are all of worth in the sight of God," Madame de Blénauge had replied. Then, seeing that her eyes were shut and thinking that she had fallen asleep, Tota had already tiptoed as far as the door when the old lady, speaking deliberately and distinctly, had added: "I shall think of you both. . . ."

Which undertaking had displeased Tota, who had no desire that anyone should meddle in her own and Marcel's affairs. She had no need of anyone's thoughts. Actually she never had really been in need of anyone except Alain. William was the first person . . . This time no fear should stand in her way. Well yes, she admitted to herself that she would be rather frightened; but the important thing was to abide in patience the event; she would not give way to panic again. And besides William would come back here with her this time; they would not go to his flat. What was it he had said? "We will have a chat, a smoke and a drink at your fireside. Something may happen or something may not. But in any case don't worry about anything beforehand; just shut your eyes."

Of course it was difficult not to think of it. Not that she believed that the thing itself was in any way important. And after all it would be a splendid reply to Marcel's idiotic suggestions. How odd is that inescapable urge to prove to ourselves that nightmares do not nor ever have existed! William would deliver her from the monotony of this self-analysis. He would rescue her from this bondage of the imagination. Yet, was she so sure? Yes, for in any case and at all costs she was certain that all would be accomplished this night. Nothing could prevent it; it was inevitable. She could not imagine anything that could possibly save her from this sorry fall. Fall? On the contrary she would be held fast from

falling; there would be from now on a rallying-point, a foothold in her life. At the worst it might be not unpleasant, and at best delicious.

She looked at herself in the glass and was sorry she had put on the black dress which William admired. She herself hated black, having the country girl's love of bright colours. This black dress made her look too thin. . . . The door-bell rang but not in a way that she recognised. It was too early surely for him; it must be the postman. The girl was out so she went herself to see who it was, opened the door,—and saw Alain.

What amazed her most was to find that she was not really surprised to see him:

"I almost think that I was expecting you . . ."

And she added:

"Fancy your arriving to-day of all days, and at this precise moment!"

It was then that she noticed that Alain, like herself, was dressed in black.

"Is it Father?" she asked.

He nodded. The day before, in the early morning, their mother had found him breathing his last on the floor by the fire-place: he had been attempting to burn some more letters. That same evening he had died, fully conscious to the last, but unable to speak a word.

"What about the money?"

No sooner had she said it than she was ashamed at having asked that question first of all. But Alain did his best not to appear shocked. It appeared that the half-burnt letter which was found still clutched in their father's hand when they picked him up had contained all the necessary dispositions; the money was safe enough.

"But I will tell you all about it. . . ."

As she had written to him to say that Marcel was leaving after

his friend Irène's funeral he, Alain, had thought it better to come and fetch her himself.

"We have only about a couple of hours to spare so you'd better get changed and pack your trunk now. . . ."

"All right," she said, realizing that she was saved, "and also I must telephone to someone who was coming to pick me up here. Wait for me in the studio. . . . And we needn't surely pretend that we are sorry? No, Alain, it's no use scowling. I bet that Mamma has cried herself dry."

"She is very sad, and so am I. Be off now and get ready, heartless baggage!"

"I'm not at all heartless. I am quite sure that once I get home I will feel upset. Will you yourself ever dare to go into his room? I believe that we shall go on all our lives walking about on tiptoe, speaking in whispers, and hearing his cough through the ceiling."

When she came back into the studio, dressed for the journey, Alain was still sitting on the same chair as before with his face turned from the light. She looked at him and suddenly throwing her arms round him kissed him several times on either cheek. He returned her kisses.

"There!" she said, sighing happily; "there's the best answer."

"What answer?"

"I could not tell you; you would never believe me. Or else maybe it would affect you, too. . . . No, no; don't ask me any questions."

She seemed to be reflecting. Should they tell Marcel to join them at La Hume?

"What a bore! And yet on the other hand living for two days there with us two would cure him once and for all. It would be bound to cure him."

"Cure him of what?"

She made no reply, merely shaking her head.

"Is it another secret?"

"Please don't ask me. What joy to be leaving here to-night with you! If only you knew how timely your arrival was!"

Brusquely she took his face between her two hands and turned it towards the light.

"What's the matter with you, Alain dear? You have something on your mind."

And, as he freed himself, forcing a laugh, she continued:

"Yes, I know there is something. Tell me, what is it?"

He was no longer even smiling; his lips moved but no words emerged.

"I know," she said, clapping her hands. And in that somewhat coarse tone which many women use when they touch on the subject, she cried:

"Love, eh? I bet that is it. Confess now!"

"You're just being foolish, my love."

"And how it has altered you," she went on. "You have become pale, your eyes have got larger. . . . Yes or no? Admit it. I refuse to leave before you tell me, so you see you will make us miss the train."

She knelt down and hid her face in his coat.

"Quickly, tell me, are you in love?"

He half closed his eyes.

"Who is it? Do I know her?"

He shook his head.

"How soon shall I make her acquaintance, then?"

He made no answer and merely put one hand before his eyes. He seemed to be suffering.

"But to whom should you tell your secrets if not to me? Alain, are you crying? Aren't you happy?"

He assured her that he was happy.

"Is it that she doesn't love you, then?"

"Darling, it is time to go. Have you forgotten anything? To-morrow morning we will send a telegram to Marcel."

He was plainly anxious to change the subject of conversation. In the taxi he asked her where Marcel was.

"He's off on a jaunt with his woman. Funny, isn't it? It's no good making such a face! No, from now on I hope that we can talk freely of everything, we two. I will tell you . . ."

He followed her in rapt attention.

"You can imagine how wild he was because I was not jealous! I need not dwell on that. In any case why should I have been jealous when I was so certain that nothing could happen between them. . . . The fact is that he does not want to have her suicide on his conscience; it would give him sleepless nights. Also he has a pre-war side to him, a 'Sir Lancelot' side, as William puts it. I believe too that he is a little bit inspired by the memory of his Irène. But all the same it is a sacrifice for him: I know that he will miss me. . . And had he known that you would turn up while he was away . . ." (She stopped short.) "No, that's got nothing to do with it. . . . I don't know why I said that."

The *Vie Parisienne* that she had bought at the station slipped from her hands. She slept, wrapped in a railway blanket. Her neat head shook limply to the lurchings of the train. Alain had a feeling that he had been sent to look for this dead body—hidden beneath who knows what heaps of ruins!—and had borne it thus far in his arms. And whither was he going now? Henceforward he would assuredly run less swiftly. For even now it was as if Tota had her arms wound round his neck; but in future it would not be she alone; many others would clutch on to him and he would have to bear the weight of not one but many. In any case he could not now turn back; behind him every bridge was broken and before him glowed the furnace through which he must pass. To be called . . . A Vocation. It is not for nothing that a man is set apart from his fellows and marked, even before he reaches manhood. Alain had in all good faith been retracing the delectable reaches of his life back through the years and now here was the

wellspring at last; a little hill, crowned with a malefactor's cross glimpsed through the everlasting clouds of contumely, hatred and love that cling to it, and surrounded by the terrifying indifference of the world (the ancient and oft repeated act, the heedless arm thrusting the same lance home). Before this vision he was helpless; it fascinated him. To it again he was driven by every answer in the penny catechism which now already for a fortnight he had been reading with the aged curé of Sauternes.

This same content, the discovery of which had brought him to his knees one evening at La Hume in a field beneath the open sky, which later had dogged his footsteps under the chestnuts of the Champs Elysees, and which had kept him awake a whole night long stretched on a divan in his brother-in-law's flat in Paris (clutching it to him lest it should escape him), this happiness he had no longer,—at least he could not find it now. It was as if someone had led him astray, far from the familiar highway, and then revealed himself for who he was. At all events he must still keep silence; thus far and no further at present.

Tota had kept her face buried in the none too clean railway pillow and showed only the nape of her shaven neck. The jolting of the train reminded him of his previous return home from Paris barely two weeks before. An interminable day in a second-class compartment filled with people, who, whenever the hour for a meal came round, unfolded greasy paper packages. He remembered thinking for the first time—it was somewhere between Chatelberault and Poitiers—of the question which he decided he must ask his mother. That question which had been formulating itself in his mind for months past and which as it seemed to him now he had been so strangely slow to realize. How had he ever been able to contain that raging curiosity within reasonable bounds? For so strong had it been that his train had scarcely seemed to move, he had despaired of ever arriving at La Hume and he was overcome by a gnawing fear lest he should die before

he knew . . . And then it was that scarcely had the old omnibus left the station at Cérons and crossed the bridge that without preamble he had asked his mother whether he had ever been baptised. He had counted upon a yes or a no but not on the effect which the question actually had caused. His mother had been both embarrassed and alarmed.

"Why do you ask me such a thing? You know quite well that your father . . ."

But he had interrupted her impatiently:

"Then I never was?"

And she, as if in self-defence, and speaking in that cowed way that living too long in the shadow of a tyrant had taught her, had said:

"I suppose it's just that I am old-fashioned and of another generation. But why worry since you don't believe in it? It doesn't necessarily mean anything, nor does it put you under any obligation. And in the case of girls particularly it is sometimes helpful to have been baptised. It was difficult, you see, to avoid having you done when I had had Tota, especially as the curé of Sauternes was always so kind."

"So I was baptised too?"

"Yes, you were. I need hardly say that your father knew nothing of it. In fact no one knew. The curé's old housekeeper and the beadle who were your godparents are both dead long ago. Nothing can be traced now. Of course you never made your first Communion. He knew that. And that's what really counts. . . . You're not angry with me about it?"

He had tried to find a simple phrase which would both reassure his mother and at the same time warn her of what to expect without upsetting her. So he had said with a casual air, as if he really considered the latter to be of small importance, that on the contrary he was glad to know that he belonged to Christ. Was that the first time that he had ever spoken that name aloud? In any case for as long as he lived he would

remember the reverberation of that one syllable within the shaky old omnibus on a road in Entre-deux-Mers one winter evening.

Alain remembered how his mother had looked at him in the dim light of the carriage lamps which were shining equally upon the burnished croup of the single horse with its string-patched harness. It may be that at that moment she was thinking of her wedding-day when as they entered the church her husband had hissed in her ear: "Take a good look at the old dungeon; it's the last time you will ever set foot in such a place." She had given way to him on what she considered was the lesser issue; for God is everywhere, she had argued, one can say one's prayers without going to church. So she had trimmed her sails, nor had she, when all is said, managed too badly; she had fulfilled her duty to the state. And now (how odd it was!) here was her child taking up with those very matters about which she had never spoken to him. He was no Forcas. Her side of the family, the Brannens, had always been religious folk; she herself at the Convent of Loretto, and right up to the time she married in fact, had followed the tradition. Yet how easy was it for such things to become choked by the cares and worries of everyday life till one wondered whether they had ever really existed at all!

And then, as they headed down the hill to the house itself and the brake squeaked on, Alain recalled how his mother had said: "The fact that the doctor wished me to send for you must mean that the end is in sight. Your father may survive until the spring but there is always the possibility that he may go off at any moment: who knows but at this very minute . . ." And as the trap turned into the drive she had looked anxiously to see whether there was a light showing from the sick man's window.

Alain had been struck by the evident confusion of expectancy, hope, grief and sheer terror which his mother's words had betrayed. He had assisted her out of the vehicle. A wrought-iron

lantern hanging in the entrance had thrown a wavering light on the uneven stone floor. And once across the threshold they had, as from long practice, spoken only in whispers. No one, for as far back as he could remember, had ever spoken above a whisper in that house.

"By the way," she had said, "I wanted to ask you: Tota . . . is she all right? . . . not too tired? You didn't notice anything?"

He realised that she was thinking of a baby. She longed for the day, maybe quite soon now, when Tota would come back to La Hume with a baby in her arms. She had never understood or got on with her headstrong daughter; but were there to be a baby. . .

"Above all don't let your father know that you have seen Tota. Be very careful. We had better say that you have been looking at some new mechanical fittings."

Alain could remember his feeling of childish fear as, following his mother, he had gone up the turnpike stair, the stone steps of which were worn with generations of use. On the landing a beam of light shone from under one door through a hole in it which the rats had made. And already the permeating odour of illness made itself felt. Mother and son stood motionless in the doorway: a large wood fire threw its light across the floor, likewise holed in places, and on to the mahogany furniture but left the recess where the bed stood in darkness.

"You go in first."

"No: after you."

Neither had the courage to enter until Madame Forcas, reassured by the sick man's noisy breathing, had made sure that he was asleep.

"He is asleep: we shall have a better day to-morrow," she had murmured with an air of profound relief, for all the world like a devoted wife torn with anxiety over her husband's wellbeing.

And Alain had kept watch until daylight over this stranger, this man whom in all his life he had never known.

"Is this Angoulême?"

Tota rubbed the misted window with her glove.

"Listen, Alain," she said. "While you were asleep I amused myself by arranging our future life at La Hume. It will be like it was in the old days, but of course without the one person who used to make life impossible there. Whenever I feel I have had enough I shall go away, and come back again later; and we'll travel. I don't think that Marcel will ever probably stay there for very long. . . ."

Her brother listened to all she had to say but remained silent. He thought to himself that in less than a month from now he would be gone. As to where he would go he had no idea; God alone knew. Tota talked on:

"But of course, I was forgetting your love-affair! But I don't suppose that it is very far afield?"

She could see that Alain was saying something, but owing to the roar of the train she could not hear his reply:

"Quite close; a mere stone's throw away."

THE DARK ANGELS

FRANÇOIS MAURIAU

THE
DARK ANGELS

(Les Anges Noirs)

Translated by
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PROLOGUE

I FULLY realize, my reverend sir, that the mere thought of me fills you with horror. No word has ever passed between us, but you know me, or think you know me, because you were once the spiritual director of my cousin, Mathilde Desbats. . . . But please don't run away with the idea that I mind. As a matter of fact, you are the only man in the whole world to whom I should like to speak frankly. I remember the look on your face when I passed you in the hall at Liogeats on the occasion of my last visit to the home of my youth. You have the eyes of a child (how old *are* you?—at a rough guess, I should say about twenty-six), of a completely innocent child, though God has given you the power to know precisely to what depths a man's depravity can sink. But don't misunderstand me. It is not at all because of the clothes you wear, and of what they imply, that I feel the need to justify myself in your eyes. I take not the slightest interest in you as a priest. It is merely that I feel convinced that you, and you alone, are capable of understanding me. As I said before, you are a child—I would go even further, and say—a very young child, but a child with the gift of wisdom. And I know, too, that your position as one who is "set apart" has been threatened.

There you are, then. Before so much as breathing a word about my own concerns, I have given you an exact statement of the opinion I formed of your character during the few moments in which I was able to study you when we met in Liogeats—in that squalid cure of souls where you live the life of a martyred priest, tied to the stake in a world inhabited by barbarous country-folk. . . . But don't be afraid. I am very far from believing the current scandals. I am, my dear sir, extremely clear-sighted. Little though my knowledge of you amounts to, I can read your heart like an open book. As soon as I knew you had brought your

sister to live with you at Liogeats, I realized, my poor, dear innocent, what you'd have to go through. It didn't take me long to recognize Tota Revaux. I had seen her about often, with her husband, in Montparnasse and Montmartre. . . . As a matter of fact, I once danced with her, without knowing who she was. I confess to having felt some surprise when I learned that you had taken that woman with the dyed hair and the plucked eyebrows into your house, after her marriage had been broken up. But I very soon realized that you still regard her with the blind devotion of a younger brother. But your half-witted parishioners are convinced that you are trying to pull the wool over their eyes. They say that she isn't your sister at all. Even in our own family circle, my cousin Mathilde, and her daughter Catherine, your one-time penitents, have put you on the Index. They now trudge all the way to Lugdunos when they want to make their confession. Good creatures though they are, they repeat all the filthy gossip about you. Not that they really believe a word of it. You can well imagine the long faces they pull when they murmur with a sigh—*"Of course, there's nothing wrong . . ."*

Perhaps they have an obscure feeling that you are—how shall I put it?—capable of understanding that craving for the gutter which is so constant an element in the make-up of some people . . . Don't be annoyed. Though I am up to my eyes in mud, though I am little better than a lifeless corpse, while you, upheld by the deep water, scarcely touch with your feet the white caps of the angry breakers, I dare swear you will not show the least surprise at the way in which my life has developed.

For years now I have longed for just such a confidant as you, for a man combining the qualities of angel and brother. There is no barrier between us. Neither your virtue nor my guilt separates us: not even your habit—which I came within an ace of wearing myself—not even your faith.

I shall try to carry sincerity to the utmost limits without giving

the angel in you the least excuse for tearing up what I have written. I shall be relentless in self-criticism; I shall avoid any pretence of establishing a moral alibi. My sole object is to convey to your understanding what can never be put into words.

If you have ever had occasion to hear a confession embracing the events of a whole life, you have not, I am sure, remained content with a dry catalogue of sins. You have striven to get a general view of your penitent's whole destiny, have traced the contours of its uplands, and shone the beam of your intelligence into the darkest recesses of its valleys. Well, then, here am I, a man who demands of you no gift of absolution, who has no belief in your power to remit sins, a man without the faintest shadow of hope. All the same, I am about to admit you to the most secret corners of myself. Don't be afraid—and this is most important—don't be afraid that what I am about to say will be for you a cause of scandal. Much in my story will strengthen your faith in that invisible world which it is your life's work to serve. The way into the supernatural often starts in the depths.

I don't want you to think that I belong by right of birth to the ranks of the bourgeoisie. It was my marriage that gave me the entrée to the great house at Liogeats. My father was the Péloueyres' bailiff, a former tenant-farmer, a man of keen intelligence, but quite uneducated. My mother died when I was eighteen months old. I am very like her. She was fair-skinned and exquisite. She and my father were the products of quite distinct races. . . . I believe that I know things about her which were long concealed from me. When a man has fallen very low, he feels the need to fix responsibility on one or other of his forebears. People of my sort hold very strongly that it is impossible to account for human degradation by the accidents of one poor devil's temperament; that only a downward movement starting from far back can have set going in him the rhythm of deterioration. In us, and through us, a host of men long dead and gone find satisfaction.

In us and through us ancestral passions are released. Can we ever know how many of the shadowy dead push us along the path we hesitate to take? (But, you will say, can we ever know how many hold us back, how many help us in our struggle with the armies of darkness? To which I can only answer that our experiences, yours and mine, in this matter differ considerably!)

The dominating influence in my life took form while I was still very young. As far back as I can remember, people liked me: or, more precisely, they liked my looks, and it was of my looks that I took advantage. You will not, I hope, suspect me of being the victim of a stupid vanity? I say all this simply in order to stress the causes of my apparent success and of my eventual undoing. But of this you must judge for yourself. My face, now that I am close on fifty, is, in essentials, the same face that led women to stop and kiss me on my way home from school. To-day, my hair is white, but its silver sheen serves but to throw into relief the healthy tan of my complexion. My weight has not increased by a pound in the course of the last twenty years. I am still wearing suits and overcoats that I bought as a young man in London.

From my earliest years I have had what I can only describe as a gift of cold inquisitiveness. I was curious about this power of mine to charm, and enjoyed watching the effect it had on others. At first instinctively, later with increasing awareness, I strove to make use of it for my own purposes. This began, as I have said, when I was very young. Once, in that room at the Institution which stank of disinfectant—how well I remember that summer's morning!—the teaching Sister suddenly called us to order by rapping the desk with her ruler, and said very loudly, as the door opened: "Stand up, children, and show your respect for your benefactress." To the accompaniment of much scraping of benches, an old lady, wearing the kind of lace bonnet that one sees in portraits of Queen Victoria, entered the room. Hard on her heels appeared the Superior and one of the Sisters, both of them

cooing and fluttering about her like a couple of doves, and apparently suffering the last extremities of uncontrollable laughter as the result of something said by the old lady which we had not caught.

"Hold out your hands!" said our form-mistress. In each of the grubby little paws our benefactress deposited three tiny sweets, one white, one pink and one blue.

"So this," said old Madame Péloueyre, putting her knobbly hand on my head (she was the mother of old Jérôme Péloueyre whom you buried last year), "... this is the Gradère boy."

"And as intelligent as he is pretty," remarked the good Sister. "Gabriel, let our benefactress hear how well you can say your 'I believe in God ...' ..."

I recited the Creed, speaking each word clearly and distinctly, and keeping my eyes fixed, all the time, on the old lady's face. It was then, I think, that I realized, for the first time, what effect they were capable of producing. She gave me an extra sweet.

"All Heaven is in that child's face." She held a murmured colloquy with the two Sisters. I heard the Superior say:

"Monsieur le curé would like to have him trained for the priesthood. He's a quiet, gentle lad, but still very young. ... It would cost a lot of money, of course ..."

"I would gladly look after that side of it. ... Nothing can be decided until after he has been confirmed. We will see then whether he has a vocation. ... I don't want to take him out of his social class and leave him without roots. ..."

From then on I became extremely pious, and served the daily Mass. In the catechism class I was held up as a shining example. Nor would it be true to say that I was merely playing a part. I was easily moved by the Church liturgy. The lights, the chants, the smell of incense were my form of luxury. Greedily I took it all in, for it provided just that element of mysterious sumptuousness for which, though I did not know it at the time, my whole being

hungered. When I compare the man I have become, my dear Abbé, with the devout little boy I was then, I can't help feeling that you priests are rather too indulgent to the outward signs of piety. Not only do they prove nothing: in certain cases, and with certain people, they are the signs of a deep-seated evil. Though the relations between Church and State were, at that time, decidedly strained, my father did finally give his consent to my embarking on the priestly profession. But it was only with the greatest difficulty that his objections were overcome. Parents, as a rule, want to see their children rise in the world . . . and I find it hard to explain his strange attitude to me at that time. What made him stand in the way of my advancement was, I think, a species of jealousy. He detested the thought of my future superiority. At thirteen I was apprenticed to a blacksmith. My muscles were still too undeveloped to make it possible for me to lift the great sledgehammer without a good deal of bodily contortion, and I was frequently beaten.

Not long before, my elder sister had died of consumption, worn out by hard work and ill-usage. She had been hired out by my father, while still a child, to some tenant-farmers as a maid of all work, which meant that she was at the beck and call of everybody, of animals as well as humans.

At long last he yielded to the representations of the curé and the ladies of the Du Buch family. As soon as the former was out of earshot, he said to me: "Better put yourself under instruction: you needn't take any final decision yet. . . ." I began by being one of the most brilliant pupils at the Seminary, and, without any doubt, I was the most popular. But why should a little country lout like me, a "learner" in a manual trade, who bore upon his body the marks of many a beating, have been so susceptible to the squalor of which the whole place was redolent? Are you familiar with the house in which the Péloueyres' present bailiff lives? It is very much as it was fifty years ago. I had spent my earliets

years, before the blacksmith interlude, in conditions of physical neglect, due to the fact that I had no mother to take care of me. I ought, by rights, to have found the food served to us at the Seminary delicious. . . . How came it, then, that I turned up my nose at it like any little spoilt scion of the bourgeoisie?

It so happened that, though I had been constantly in and out of the Péloueyre house, where I was regarded very much in the light of a tame cat, I had very seldom got beyond the kitchen. Things in the Du Buch house were very different. I was given the freedom of the drawing-room and was frequently taken on their knees by the two ladies of the place. At the end of the last century, that house, to which the people of Liogeats always refer as "The Chateau," looked precisely as it does to-day. It stands a hundred yards back from the road on the outskirts of the little town, and is surrounded by pine-trees. A great sweep of waterlogged grassland comes right up to the front steps, and the great trees of Frontenac close the view. At the time of which I am speaking, it was inhabited by the two old Du Buch ladies whom you never knew. They were sisters, one of them a widow, the other separated from her husband. The eldest of them had a daughter, Adila, who was a girl of eighteen when I was twelve. The younger also had a daughter, a few years my junior, called Mathilde, who later married Symphorien Desbats. During the holidays, these two cousins, Adila and Mathilde, were constantly at loggerheads about me. The elder wanted to read to me and to correct my exercises, while the younger, Mathilde, was forever at me to share her games. I must have been a very odd child! At first I showed a strong preference for my well-meaning and self-appointed governess, though she kept my nose to the grindstone with scarcely a pause. I had, I don't deny it, a very active mind. I was full of a natural curiosity, and was eager to absorb all the information I could pick up. No amount of mental work put me off. But from the age of fifteen, I began to be attracted to

Adila for quite other reasons. She wouldn't have been bad-looking but for a pair of prominent eyes like a frog's, a thick-lipped mouth which was always half open, revealing a set of irregular teeth, and a heavy mass of hair which she wore piled on top of her head. But her worst feature was her neck, or, rather, absence of neck, for it was scarcely visible at all. Her face rose straight from her shoulders. She always looked as though she were bursting out of her clothes. Arms, legs and figure, all seemed outsize and shapeless. Nevertheless, I began to find her rather pleasing. You must have noticed how, quite often, young, well-built, country lads have a way of marrying the most frightful women. They do so in response to the prompting of simple animal instincts, and these instincts were, during the years of my adolescence, strong in me. When, later, Adila Du Buch became my wife, people would have laughed in my face had I ventured to say that I had ever been in love with her. But I am speaking no more than the truth when I tell you that I did once find her distinctly alluring. . . . But what weakness I may have had for her was never sufficiently strong to keep me faithful.

You must forgive me for leading you by this roundabout way to the source of all my future destiny, or, rather (because I've got to go back still further), to the point in my life at which I began to go wrong with my eyes open, and with a concentrated awareness which you may find it hard to credit. Adila Du Buch was an extremely pious and charitable young woman, akin in temperament to Eugénie de Guérin. She clothed the poor, tended the sick, laid out the dead. She was moved, in particular, by a great sense of compassion for the old who, at that time, were left very much to their own devices in our part of the world, being, not seldom, positively victimized. . . . She would go visiting all over the countryside, driving her own trap, and always swathed in a red flannel cloak with a hood. She adored me. I was her one and only vice. For a long time she took delight in mothering me,

and, in term-time, would make the trip into Bordeaux for the sole purpose of seeing me. Hampers of cold meats and sweets used to reach me from Liogeats. I will spare you the tale of how, from year to year, I grew more and more cunning at her expense. Moral depravity, carried to such lengths in one so young, cannot but give cause for wonder, and yet I am not sure that it is really very unusual. Many adolescents take a normal pleasure in stirring up mud, but the remarkable thing in my case was that I had not the slightest difficulty in persuading her of my utter innocence; that, where I was concerned, her suspicions were never once aroused.

Now, just imagine the terrible crises of conscience that may occur in the mind of a pious young female who holds herself to be responsible, not only for her own feelings, but for those, too, which she may rouse in the child committed to her care. And not just any child, mark you, but a budding seminarist, a future levite! How came it that I could follow with so eager a curiosity the progress of a conflagration which I myself had started? None of Adila's pitiable little struggles escaped my notice, none of the excuses which she produced for always being absent from Liogeats when the Christmas and Easter holidays took me back there. She would make a retreat in some neighbouring convent, but I almost always managed to prevail on her to return before I had to leave again for Bordeaux. Nor was I taken in for a single moment by the scruples of doubt which she produced as a reason for absenting herself from the Sacraments. What really was monstrous was that I could thoroughly enjoy the drama of the whole thing. My face never looked so innocent as during those years. In the crowd of grubby little seminarists I flourished like a lily. "Young Gradère:—a positive little angel. . . ." Had I been a believing Christian, I should say now that every time I made my confession, every time I took communion, I was guilty of sacrilege. But I had already lost my faith. . . . And without faith, am I not right, it is impossible to commit sacrilege?

I had not even the excuse—I won't say of love (that goes without saying), but even of that initial attraction which, in my case, quickly died away. Not that I was incapable of falling in love. No, the fact was that with every passing year I found Mathilde increasingly alluring, and confided my feeling for her, with a deliberate assumption of simple-mindedness, to Adila. It wasn't enough for the poor girl to be harassed by scruples: jealousy poured oil on the flames—a jealousy which filled her with feelings of shame and horror. I think that at this time she would have been glad to die. Perhaps she should have died, perhaps that would have been the best way out of the situation—but I ought not to say a thing like that to you! She longed for death, and I wanted her to die. Had she done so, would not everyone have said that I was the cause? Certainly, I was convinced of it myself. . . . Adila ought to have killed herself, in spite of her faith, in spite of her fear of hell. . . . But all she did was to pray. She never stopped praying: even when she was in a state of sin she went on praying. . . . It is fortunate that the world laughs at old women's prayers. It is better that it should not know what power resides in them. . . .

I got my *baccalauréat* just before I turned seventeen. About that time Combes was dealing devastating blows at the Church in France. Suddenly, I began to entertain grave doubts of my vocation. Not only did the curé of Liogeats and the Du Buch ladies refrain from uttering a single word of reproach, they actually decided to shoulder the cost of sending me to the University, where I was very anxious to pursue my studies. During those last holidays I hardly ever left the chateau. I took all my meals there. Adila no longer looked young. She was becoming fat and asthmatic. The way in which she continually kept a watchful eye on Mathilde and me became intolerably irksome. We did, however, manage to get free of it on occasion, because the poor girl was forever being called to this or that house in the parish. She began to

see through my little game, but continued to regard me as her creation and her responsibility. Not for a moment would it have occurred to her that she had any right to upbraid me, no matter how lightly. At Bordeaux I enrolled myself in the Faculty of Letters. From my patrons I received just enough to cover board and lodging. I had dreamed of leading a free and happy existence, but fact was very different from fancy, and I found myself, with practically no resources, living in a wretched room in the rue Lambert, situated in the Meriadeck quarter of the city. I thought it only natural that Adila should help me, but she was allowed only the barest minimum of pocket-money, which meant that what she did send me had to be taken from her charitable funds.

I must, as I proceed with my story, be fair to myself and not disguise such extenuating circumstances as there may have been. No one realizes how terribly an eighteen-year-old student, with no family behind him, can suffer from cold and hunger. A prostitute who lived in the same house took pity on me. Her name was Aline. Occasionally, we used to exchange a few words on the stairs. Then I got influenza and she looked after me. That was how the whole affair started. She noted down every penny she spent, but I never had enough money to be able to free myself from being dependent on her. She was very young and had not yet lost her freshness. The proprietor of a bar fell for her, and set her up in one of those little single-storey houses which we, in Bordeaux, call "lean-to's." There was no concierge, and, consequently, little fear of indiscreet talk. The place was down in the docks, opposite a timber-yard.

I spent some part of each day there: the rest of my time I gave to frequenting the city library, where everything was grist to my mill. . . . (what didn't I read in those days?). In the evenings I used to go to the café which faces the Grand Theatre. To me it seemed the most luxurious spot in the whole world. An orches-

tra used to play selections from *Werther* and *La Berceuse de Jocelyn*. After those first weeks of deprivation I was left with a craving for hot food and strong drink. Later, I learned—I won't say to feel ashamed, but to know what a man feels when it is always the woman who "stands treat." This situation lasted until the spring. One day, the proprietor of the bar whom I have already mentioned caught us. He had been warned by an anonymous letter. He forgave Aline, but I was slung out on my ear after a thrashing, the marks of which I carried about with me for a very long time.

I should like to cut the story short. But I must tell you everything, and this I shall do in the dry, factual style of a police report, avoiding undue emphasis, lest you be tempted, from sheer disgust, to throw what I have written into the waste-paper-basket. The Easter holidays saw me back at Liogeats. Mathilde, now an orphan, was finishing her education at a school in Brighton, I spent all my time alone with Adila. All I want is that you should understand precisely the nature of my guilt. It is one thing to lead a young girl wrong, another to set about deliberately corrupting her. After my departure, Adila, who had once been so frank, went out of her way to lie and to find excuses for going into Bordeaux with the object of bringing me money. I made her pay dearly for her devotion, but, in spite of everything I could say, she obstinately refused to claim her share of the paternal fortune. By this time she knew me thoroughly: in fact, she was the only person who really did know me, and she played her hand cleverly. Poor, fat Adila! At Liogeats she avoided everybody. Madame Du Buch spent her days in lamentations, and was for ever praying that Adila might "recover her faith." But on this point of the family inheritance the girl was as obstinate as a mule. Nothing that I could say would extract from her a promise to claim the money which her mother was keeping back without a shadow of justification. I had, at times, to ride her on a pretty light rein, so afraid was I that she might give me the slip altogether.

Truth to tell, though I had reduced her to a pretty low moral ebb, she was not yet in a mood of despair: and no matter how many crimes a Christian may have on his conscience, they don't, so long as he never despairs—I am right in this, am I not?—build between him and God any wall that a word or a sigh of contrition cannot demolish. This I knew, and knew, too, that she was waiting until I should be called up for my military service, was, indeed, counting on the inevitable separation that that would entail.

"I shall *have* to give you up then"—she would say: "I shall go and hide myself, not in a convent but in the pig-stye belonging to some convent, or, better still, in a House of Penitents."

"Nonsense," I answered: "no matter how far away I may be stationed, you'll hunt me out, and . . ."

—But I won't set down on paper the words I used. It was as though they had no connexion with me.

I had a presentiment that I should never actually do my military service. I have had such presentiments in my life and they have always been proved true. What I knew would happen did happen. At the age of twenty I went down with pleurisy. I was never in danger, but the effects lasted a long time, and in this way I was saved from an army life. About that time I lost my father. Each year, just before the holidays, I solemnly announced to my benefactors a whole series of purely imaginary successes in University examinations, though, as a matter of fact, I never managed to get so much as an honourable mention. There were no other young men from Liogeats on the Faculty Class Lists, and it was easy for me to play that particular little game without any danger of being shown up.

At this time, too, I felt that my influence over Adila was so strong that I could safely threaten to abandon her unless she consented to do something about the money that was her due. She had finally broken with her family, and was living alone at Bilbao. I had no idea that she was pregnant. The poor girl had con-

trived this breach so as to have her child somewhere abroad. It was easy now for me to manage without any further assistance from her. Aline had written to tell me that her café-proprietor was dead, and that she was free. I never knew whether he had made over part of his fortune to her during his lifetime, nor whether she had helped the processes of nature. I very foolishly adopted a policy of complete silence about the whole business. I say foolishly, because at that time she was quite unsuspecting, and might have blown the gaff. Later, when I came to realize how much to my interest it was to keep a tight hold on her, she was already on the defensive, and I could get nothing out of her.

I found her ensconced in a world of middle-class respectability, with a servant and an apartment of her own, living the life of a lady of leisure. She sub-let a room on the third floor to me, but I made use of it only on infrequent occasions. I paid her no rent. She had become a business-woman, and had an interest in a number of—well, let us just say, “houses.” Don’t be alarmed: I shall pass quickly over this period of my life. All you need to know is that I became her professional associate, and took my share of the profits. This, more than any incident of my life, demands only the sketchiest of references. Do not avert your eyes, my reverend sir, unless you want to be turned into a pillar of salt. Aline had a genius for blackmail. It is a dangerous game, but we had a number of friends in the police force, which is why, as a matter of fact, we had to close down. They were altogether too greedy, and ended by killing the geese that laid the golden eggs.

Meanwhile, in January, 1913, Adila, the only living creature who really knew me through and through (which was probably why she adopted towards me an attitude of pitying comprehension that positively froze my blood), Adila wrote to tell me of the birth of our son, André. She mentioned marriage, and did all she could to get her mother’s approval. But by this time the old lady was in a very bad way, and died shortly afterwards.

But so long as I could live in the lap of luxury with Aline, I refused to consider the idea of such a marriage, magnificent though it would have been from my point of view. The thought of living with Adila filled me with horror. True, I was deeply attached to her, but whenever we were together I felt myself oppressed by a sense of shame which I find it impossible to describe in words. And that was strange in view of the depths of degradation to which I had sunk. I could not rid myself of the vision of what she once had been, a plump, healthy, happy Lio-geats girl, doing her duty to her God, and beloved of all the poor for miles around; a girl whom I had dragged down though never driven to despair. She had never despaired.

Only later, when the war had already been raging for some time, did we get married. My hand was to some extent forced. I had, you see, to find some way of escaping from a situation which offered no other way out. A Medical Board had passed me unfit for service, and, at the beginning of 1915, I had gone to Paris with Aline. At first we made a lot of money, though I am not quite brazen enough to tell you how. Never had the trade in drugs been so flourishing. A lot of cocaine was coming into the country from Germany via Holland. All you need know, in order to understand the sequel, is that certain incidents, which might have had very unpleasant results, made it quite impossible for me to break away from Aline. After 1915 she had a stranglehold on me. Gone were the days when, in her besotted affection, she had nursed me in a room in the rue Lambert of the Meriadeck quarter. She wasn't even the shrewd "Madame" who had taken me into partnership. Drink had always been her particular vice, and, as time went on, she sank deeper and deeper into the mire. She reached a point at which she no longer bothered about the ordinary affairs of life. She left them all to me. I swear to you that she had me exactly where she wanted me. For that you must take my word, and will not, I hope, insist on details.

To sum up. At that time there was a woman in my life—there still is—who spent her life lying in bed with a bottle of Pernod and a glass beside her, reading detective novels. She had given up washing altogether, and nobody kept the house clean. I won't try to describe to you the state of her embroidered sheets and silk nightdresses all torn and covered with stains. There were dirty glasses and empty bottles everywhere. . . . She insisted on my going to see her on certain fixed days. She had made a proper fool of me, my dear sir. Nevertheless, I had been promised, something inside me told me that I had been promised (you will think I am quite mad!), that everything would go right for me in this world. And it is true that, in some ways, everything had gone right for me, that I have lived the life of a privileged person. At a time when so many young men of my age were suffering and dying in the mud of the trenches, I was snug and safe, and making money. "But it's not my fault" said a voice within me, "If you've got yourself into a jam with two women. Marry the rich one, and you won't have to bother any more about the other, who is poor and has a hold on you. . . ." I am perfectly well aware that when a voice speaks like that it is one's own.

I sent Adila a short letter in which I said that I had made up my mind to marry her. I left Paris round about Easter. I have a vivid memory of the evening on which I arrived at Liogeats. No one was expecting me. The cook told me that Adila was spending the evening at the bedside of a dying man in the hospital run by her family in what had formerly been the free school.

Next morning she came into my room, after first knocking at the door. She had grown a good deal thinner, and her nurse's coif made her look less ugly. But although she was barely forty she looked so old that I was appalled. My first feeling was one of horror at the idea of marrying her, because, though I was actually thirty-two, no one would have taken me for more than twenty.

Adila looked at me without saying a word. I was still lying in bed, and could see in the mirror exactly how I must appear to this aging woman whom I had got to marry. She stood there, keeping as far from me as possible, and did not even go through the motions of embracing me. She told me that she had left little Andrès in charge of a nurse at Bilbao, and that he was a very pretty baby—as though I took the slightest interest in the brat! I remember that the window was wide open. The Easter sunlight was flooding my bed, and on the leafless branches of the oaks tits were calling to one another. . . . There was so much young life, so much happiness, in a world which, in spite of the organized slaughter of the war, seemed full of love! I lay there looking at the woman who was to be my portion. . . . A greying lock of hair had escaped from beneath her coif. She kept her eyes lowered, and there was a look of passive acquiescence on her face. Obviously, she had made up her mind not to look at me.

I could contain myself no longer, but broke into a babble of words:

“You’ve got what you wanted. . . . You flatter yourself that you’ve bought me. . . . You think I belong to you . . . but just you wait!”

She raised her eyes. I have always been able to read people’s faces. There was nothing in the expression of hers that denoted greed or even violent emotion of any kind. I got out of bed, but still she looked at me. I took a few steps towards her. She was leaning against the door, and her lips were moving. She had gone so white that I asked whether I had frightened her. She nodded her head.

“Then, why are you marrying me?”

“I’ve got to: because of Andrès.”

“But you no longer love me?”

She made a vague gesture.

“You have a horror of me?”

"Not of you"—she protested: "but of something in you."

"Of something in me that is evil? Well, whatever that something is, it is of your making—as you know perfectly well."

That got under her skin, and she uttered a groan.

"Don't forget, Adila, that I was a very young, a very innocent boy . . . a seminarist . . ."

Her eyes filled with tears. The poor flabby face was eloquent of fear. Suddenly she collapsed on the floor, and there was I, standing in my pyjamas—you have got the scene clear, haven't you?—watching her. She had buried her head in her arms, and her heavy body was shaken by sobs. If there is one sentiment to which I am a stranger, it is pity—even for a creature to whom I may be attached by as many bonds as I was to her. . . . Well, believe it or not, at that moment I *did* feel pity for her, pity that—how shall I put it?—was in some sense supernatural, and when I say that, I do so deliberately. In spite of myself, I protested:

"Forget it. . . . You're unhappy enough as it is. . . . Forget what I said. . . . What's that you're muttering?"

I leaned over her and pushed aside the damp lock of hair that was plastered across her forehead. I tried to catch the words struggling through her sobs. One phrase did at last reach me: ". . . a millstone were hanged about his neck . . ."

She repeated the threat that Christ had uttered against those who have offended against those little ones which believe in Him: "it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck . . ." An impulse which I found it impossible to resist brought me to my knees beside her. I took her in my arms.

"My poor dear, that threat has nothing to do with you. I was not, I never had been, one of those little ones whose angels see the Almighty face to face. As far back into my past as I can look, corruption has always been implanted in my soul. I took pleasure in troubling your peace of mind. . . . In such matters a man's age is

of no account. . . . I came into the world with a gift, but it was not, as with other men, the gift of innocence, but of wearing on my face the mask that apes innocence. Between the lashes of my childish eyes I watched the working of the temptation I had awakened in your heart and body. I felt that in me your soul had found a terrible source of danger, and the realization filled me with delight. I knew that I was the bait of the trap set to catch you. My mouth was filled with the taste of my own poison. You drew close to a body that was possessed of evil. You prowled around the false candour of my nature. Tremblingly you approached, withdrew, returned—and all the time I was on the watch. Nothing escaped me. I was a child with a heart of ice, and I played with you. Don't worry. Of the two of us, it was I who was the tempter. I was stronger and older than you. How very old I was at sixteen!—as old as the world!—and you, in spite of your seven years' seniority, had the heart of a child."

She had struggled to her feet, and now stood leaning against the wall. I can still see the puffy face, the hair escaping from beneath the white coif, can still hear the note of the woodpecker, the chirping of the tits, the song of the migrant thrushes who had settled in the ivy. . . . It was one of the mornings of Holy Week. . . . Of all the moments of my life that was the only one in which my actions were not evil. What I did then was good, for I held back a living soul from the very brink of despair. . . . In spite of myself, no doubt, in spite of myself . . . but in spite of someone else too.

"You must run away . . . from me!" I said it not once, but again and again. "Take advantage of this moment. Make your escape!"

She shook her head, and the eyes with which she fixed me held a deep tenderness. Now and again a fit of trembling caught her, but she had stopped crying. She kept on saying—"Impossible!" and at the sound of that word I recovered my normal tone of voice.

"Aren't you cured of me, then?" I asked.

She jerked upright as though I had pricked her. But I pressed my advantage:

"If you really were cured of me, you would run away as fast as your legs could carry you. Don't you realize what I have got in store for you?"

She said that she did.

"You think you know me . . . but you have no conception of what I am capable. . . ." (It was as though I wanted her to become, as though she *had* to become, my wife with her eyes open.)

"How should I not have?"

There was a flatness in the voice in which she asked that question; a flatness in which I thought I could detect a note of disgust; and at that my anger blazed anew:

"We'll see whether you're so proud once the deed is done!"

With her head thrown back she pressed against the wall, and stared at me.

"I am impatient to get it finished with," she murmured. "The hardest thing of all will be to tell . . ."

I interrupted her roughly, but she went on:

"It's not of my mother that I am thinking. I have long prepared her mind for what is to happen. The news will not surprise her. No, I was thinking of Mathilde. . . ."

Why did she speak to me of Mathilde? We had always avoided, both of us, any mention of that name. I remembered that Mathilde was in England. How could she possibly concern us? We should confront her with the accomplished fact.

In a low voice Adila continued: "She is coming home to-morrow."

She stared into space, and two tears were trickling down her cheeks.

"I shall have to tell her. . . ."

"What's she got to do with it? She's only your cousin, though

you've both lived in the same house, of course . . . I suppose you realize that I shall take you to Paris?"

I bit my lip, annoyed to think that I had given myself away, instead of waiting until we were married before announcing that I planned to leave Liogeats. But I saw that my words had left her indifferent. She was entering on marriage much as she might have thrown herself into the sea.

"Paris or elsewhere . . ." she murmured.

"You're right. In Paris or elsewhere you will be with me as my wife, for better or for worse, flesh of my flesh."

In a low voice she said: "I am that already." At the sound of those words I pressed her hard:

"Given over to me bound hand and foot, Adila: my chattel, alone, isolated. There will be no one to come between us."

I had a feeling that I had failed to dominate her. She did not quail under my glance, but stood up sturdily to the attack I levelled at her.

"No, I shall not be alone: I am not alone now. If I had been I should have fled from you long ago to the end of the world, or into the world beyond."

I could think of no answer, and after a moment's silence, she went on:

"I shall speak to my mother . . . but Mathilde is more than I can manage. You must tell her the news yourself . . . and the sooner the better . . . to-morrow. We must get it all finished quickly . . . why not in Paris, since that is where you are legally domiciled?"

"No," I protested: "I want a church marriage, here. I want you to walk through Liogeats in your white dress. I want our neighbours to be present at my triumph . . . a fine triumph, eh? Some of them have a shrewd idea of what has happened, and you must expect a few snubs, my girl. Well, you must put up with that! I insist on a slap-up wedding in Liogeats church."

"You shall have it: we shall have it." She never took her eyes from my face, and her breathing was quick and sharp.

All that day I saw no one. I dared not venture into the village, filled as it was with war-widows and with mothers who had lost their sons. Not a house but was in mourning, not a family but lived in an agony of suspense. In those days people could not bear to see an able-bodied young man in civilian clothes. As a matter of fact, my discharge on grounds of health was perfectly genuine. The state of one of my lungs, as revealed by auscultation and the X-ray, still gave cause for a good deal of anxiety. The odd thing was that it did not worry me. I never felt tired. I was as strong as a horse. Explain it how you will I was, in some odd way, being shielded—there's no getting away from it—kept in safety. . . . Yes, the clearer the lines of my destiny became, the more it terrified me.

I spent the day hanging about the garden. Adila had gone back to the hospital. For several years now her mother had given up coming down to meals. The old lady's windows in the main front of the chateau were the only ones to have their shutters thrown back. All the others were tight closed. I saw a servant washing down the windows of Mathilde's room, which communicated with Adila's in the west wing.

At noon I got a letter from Aline. Its tone was imperious and threatening. But it entirely failed to disturb me. It was to her interest not to put a spoke in the wheel of my marriage, and I had nothing to fear so long as the money-bags were not safely in my hands. Only when I was sure of them would she launch her attack. I trembled to think what would happen then. People of your sort, dear, reverend sir, constantly wonder how people of my sort can ever seriously think of doing away with those who stand in their path. From that moment one of my main pre-occupations was to discover some way of getting rid of Aline. I had a fertile imagination and spent my whole time suppressing

her—in thought. What a number of crime-stories I could write with the material which my inventiveness provided me at that time! But no such thing as the perfect crime exists. Besides, Aline had long been trained in the dangerous school of blackmail, and was perpetually on her guard. She often spoke about this temptation of mine, referring to it as to something self-obvious. She would explain how it was that I should never kill her, *could* never kill her,—the reason being that within forty-eight hours I should be suspected and picked up by the police. Everything would conspire to give me away. Besides—and this she told me more than once—she had confided to safe hands certain documents which would at once turn the eyes of the Law in my direction. The old bitch finally convinced me that my interest lay in her remaining alive, and that, if anything happened to her, no matter how innocent I might be, I shouldn't stand a chance.

The day passed for me in the wild and leafless woods. Who I was they did not know, though they had been familiar with me since my childhood. Only men of my kind can truly love the adorable world of nature, because it is without eyes to see, without conscience to judge, us. It is a world full of sweet scents, of beasts and of stars; a world that recks nothing of saint or sinner, of those that are saved or of those that are damned. About three o'clock, I remember, I sat down on a felled pine-trunk whose vast girth had stripped the oak-trees in its fall. There, with the smell of torn bark about me, I enjoyed the warmth of the day as innocently as any fox or forest bird. Nature was not concerned to call me to account. All creatures living in close communion with her, and forming part of her most secret life, devour one another. I was but one among a thousand beasts of prey who at that very moment were enjoying the heat of the sun on plumage, pelt or wing-case. I was free from mental suffering. By some miracle it had withdrawn awhile. . . I tell you this because it is important that you should realize that, as a rule, I was never, for a single

moment, without a terrible agony of mind, a frightful sense, that never left me, of being caught in a vice which would not let me go. At that time I had not yet heard what one of your lot said to me later, an old priest with the face of a saint whom I used occasionally to meet on the winding roads of Super-Bagnères when I was taking a cure at Luchon. We were talking of the "Prince of this world"—as he called him. Suddenly he said, in a tone of such certainty that it turned my blood cold: "*There are human souls that have been given to him*" . . . I got the impression that he knew what he was talking about. I dared not question him, and hurriedly changed the subject. Since that day I have looked everywhere for the old fellow, so as to make him explain what he meant. I did, finally, get on his tracks, but only to find that he had just died in what I believe you call "the odour of sanctity," in a home for aged priests at Vanves, taking his terrible secret with him: "*there are human souls that have been given to him. . .*"

Mathilde arrived next day, after luncheon. I was not there to meet her. All afternoon I heard her calling to Adila, laughing and singing as she moved about her room, unpacking, slamming the doors. In just such a way, when she was a little girl, had everything seemed to come to life as she went through the house, and it was the same now. She had not changed. I was sitting in the sun, reading the papers, when suddenly a hand snatched off my hat. There was a burst of familiar laughter. I recognised it, but at first it was the only thing about her that I did recognize. This tall, lanky girl, with the darting movements of a swallow, had little about her to remind me of the sallow, ailing child who had been the partner of my games. Nor did she resemble the Mathilde Desbats she afterwards became, the Madame Symphorien Desbats whose spiritual director you no longer have the honour to be. Anything less tragic than the Mathilde of that time it would be hard to imagine. There was nothing about her then of that

imposing presence which you knew . . . Scared . . . yes, she certainly was that. She was like a swallow that has got into a room by mistake, and bumps against all the furniture. She was too thin, too angular. . . . Standing there in the middle of the garden-path, like a bird that has alighted for a brief moment, she swung her hat and stared at me with little jerky movements of her small head with its thick-growing hair. I could describe to you to-day exactly how she was dressed, her arms bare, in spite of the weather which was still far from warm, with a great string of coral beads round her brown throat. I was no longer myself: I did not know who I was. A mysterious tide of tenderness welled up from the depths of my being and spread over the surface of my evil life. I had become once again a young boy in the presence of a young girl. My whole past existence seemed like something seen in a dream, something without reality. I was back in the days when we used to play hide-and-seek behind the privet-hedge, when Adila was "he," trying to find us, calling our names, while I crouched with my arms about her, not holding her tight, and hers were round my neck. All the squalor of my life was no more than the substance of a quick nightmare from which I had waked with a start to find her still there, still my little sweetheart, both of us waiting for something to happen, both of us careful not to precipitate a decision.

Suddenly she spoke: "You're not a bit different, dear little Gabriel: you still blush as you always did. . . ."

Fatal words! At once the mist cleared, and I saw my life as it was.

Had it, then, left no mark upon me? But, indeed, what Mathilde had just said was almost true. In the days when we used to play together, I had been as much a lost soul as I am now—only the seeming innocence of childhood had concealed the truth. . . . No, I had not changed. Whatever my subsequent actions, I had added nothing to my true features, to my features as they were laid up in eternity.

"You don't *look* ill . . . though you must be. Oh, I know all about it. When I was here last I had a squint at your X-ray pictures. . . . I'm no end of a dab at medicine, you know! . . . It really is quite extraordinary how healthy you look."

She asked about my temperature, and seemed to be quite put out to hear that I did not take it every evening. We wandered off together. A great number of pines had been felled, and the clearings thus made had destroyed our remembered haunts. Once, in order to reach the banks of the Balion, which, in those days had flowed through a tangled shade of oaks and alders, we had had to force a path through a mass of underbrush. Now its surface was naked to the sky, and it rippled through a great expanse of bare ground dotted with tree-stumps and covered with a scatter of bark.

"Well, anyhow the Balion itself hasn't changed," said Mathilde. "Do you think that even bombardment, even gas could hurt a stream? There's no way in which one can injure running water. . . ."

"Yes, my child, there is" (I had always called her "my child"): "one can poison it. . . . Hullo!—our 'jouquet's' still there!"

I take it that you know what we mean by a "jouquet" in Liogeats—a sort of a hut, a hide-out used for pigeon-shooting. We entered it now, just as we used to do. It no more occurred to me to turn our isolation to account than it occurred to Mathilde to be on her guard. We had met again like two children who for many years had spent their summer holidays in the same stretch of country. In perfect simplicity we stood side by side, our shoulders touching, and once again, in that wide silence filled with the scent of dead bracken, I lost all sense of my identity. I could almost believe that the actions which had left no tell-tale mark upon my face had similarly spared my soul. Perhaps Mathilde, in her youth and freshness, had enough of innocence for the two of us: For the space of a few moments I knew happiness.

... Oh yes, I *do* know what happiness can mean . . . until she said:

"I say, Adila *is* changed . . . I hardly recognised her; she looks like an old woman."

I made no reply. A few drops of rain splashed noisily on our roof of leaves and bracken. Somewhere quite close a bird was singing shrilly. I mustn't think of Adila! I mustn't think of Adila! But no matter how hard I tried to keep her at a distance, there she was, for the rest of the afternoon, between us. Mathilde asked me what I was doing with myself, and how I was managing to live. My replies to her questions were very carefully worded, but I was a prey to secret dread. She was one of those thoroughly practical girls, well versed in business matters, whom one frequently meets in our part of the world, and I had the greatest difficulty in putting her off the scent. Fortunately, some of my activities were above board and could be discussed openly. At that time one could buy almost anything, hold it for a month, and then re-sell at a high profit. Mathilde pulled a face. She called that sort of thing "living from hand to mouth."

"Haven't you ever thought of leaving Paris and coming back to Liogeats for good?" she asked.

"What should I do at Liogeats?"

"How do I know?—Find something."

Our eyes met in the darkness of the hut. The rain had stopped. The smell and the feel of damp earth wrapped us round . . . but we were warm enough. I knew what it was she was offering me. I understood . . . but, alas, it was too late!—unless I was prepared to sacrifice Adila . . . Not that she *would* be sacrificed. Adila no longer loved me. She looked on our marriage as nothing more than an act of reparation. She had no weapon against me.

"You might, for instance, look after my property—why not?"

"In what capacity?"

She avoided the question, began to talk in a desultory way

about Brighton, and told me of two friends of hers, Australian girls, whose parents had gone down on a torpedoed ship. Suddenly she asked whether I knew why she had come back to France. There was a plan afoot for her to marry one of her cousins—Symphorien Desbats—a man twenty years her senior, who had been looking after her land even while her parents were alive. I showed vague signs of emotion.

"I've not made up my mind yet what answer to give" she said: "but if, as seems probable, it's going to be No—I can hardly refuse by letter a man to whom I owe so much. . . ."

It had begun to rain again. We ran all the way back to the house. I had taken her hand as I always had done when we were children, but now she was quicker on her feet than I was. Thus, hand in hand, we entered the dark hall. The storm was rumbling faintly in the distance. I noticed a nurse's cape lying on one of the chairs.

"Adila's back," said Mathilde. "I don't quite like to call her, because I've got a feeling that she's avoiding me. Can you think of any reason why she should be angry with me? Perhaps she thinks I didn't write to her often enough . . . but, after all, we've never been on very intimate terms. Oh well, when I'm married I shall have a home of my own at last."

"Isn't the chateau owned jointly by you two?"

"I shall get out . . . it doesn't mean a thing to me. . . . If Adila wants to keep it . . ."

"Monsieur Desbat's house on the Square is a gloomy sort of place."

In a voice that trembled she said there was no question of her living "in Monsieur Desbat's house."

As usual, whenever there was a storm, the electric lights had been switched off. We were still standing, and all round us was the rustle of rain in the dusk. We heard steps on the first floor. I was seized by a mad unreasoning desire to tell Adila everything at

once, to throw her overboard. I just couldn't wait a moment longer in a condition of uncertainty. All I wanted was that the way should be made clear for me, so that I might at last have a chance of being happy. I would sweep all obstacles aside. In imagination I was already rushing to do them battle, like a man possessed. And what about Aline? Well, Mathilde was as rich as Adila . . . and I could divert a sum large enough to keep Aline's mouth shut. . . . But that, of course, was nonsense. I knew only too well that nothing would stop the wretched creature from levying blackmail on me until I had got her out of the way for good and all. Once the marriage was an accomplished fact I should have to begin thinking seriously about that. The mere fact of happiness, of a happiness such as I had never dreamed of having, would give me courage to reduce Aline to silence,—to the silence of eternity. Yes, on the spur of the moment, standing there in the entrance hall of a country house, within touching distance of a young girl whose hurried breathing I could hear beside me, I decided on that one last crime which would give me the right never to commit another. One more crime, and then, never again!

The rain was making a great deal of noise. The storm was bursting over our heads, but all I could hear was the faint sound of Mathilde's rapid breathing. I stretched out my hands fumblingly in the darkness.

"Ever since we first knew one another!"—she murmured: "and you?"

I held her in my arms, but could not keep my mind from the noise of those heavy footsteps above our heads. Adila . . . I must get rid of Adila at once . . . I could not remain in suspense a moment longer. Very gently I pushed Mathilde aside, telling her to go to her room and wait for me there.

I burst in on Adila without knocking, like a thief. She was pacing up and down saying her Rosary. It was the sound of that continual pacing that we had heard downstairs in the hall.

Candles were burning on the mantelpiece. My appearance seemed to disturb her, and she stopped, her rosary wound about her wrist.

"I wanted to have a word with you before dinner" (how gentle my voice was; its gentleness surprised even me): "I've been thinking over what we were saying yesterday. I've done you enough harm already, my poor Adila. . . . It would be madness for us to get married. . . ."

Her gesture was eloquent of weariness. "What use is there in going over all that again? Everything that could be said has been said already."

I stumbled over my words. I was in the grip of a blind rage.

"And what about me? What's going to happen to me? How about *my* happiness?"

Adila turned and looked at me intently:

"Your *happiness*? . . . It's my fortune, my property. . . ."

She spoke with an air of complete detachment. I protested that I didn't give a fig for her property. I tried in vain to control myself.

"I can have just as good—a better property than yours . . . and marry a woman into the bargain who won't be . . ." (Here I uttered one of those words that occasionally slip from me . . . one of those gutter words that are not really typical of me at all, because, ordinarily, I recoil from using them. But you wouldn't believe the kind of language that rises to my lips on occasion. . . .)

In a trembling voice Adila put a question: "What woman? . . . Mathilde? . . . I thought as much . . . I felt it coming." The last words she added with a look of deep distress. Then, very calmly:

"Oh no, my dear, you had better give up all thought of any such thing."

"Who's going to stop me?" I blustered. She replied that she had ways and means.

"It would be the end of you . . ."

I was in one of those paroxysms of rage from the effects of

which she suffered more than once. But she did not so much as flinch, but kept her eyes steadily fixed on me:

"You're not frightening me: I'm prepared for anything. Listen carefully. I will gladly incriminate myself if, by that means, I can save Mathilde. Don't you yet realize that I have nothing more to lose, nothing more to gain, that I have already lost all or gained all . . . that you no longer have it in your power to do me either good or harm?"

I raised my hands to the level of her fat white neck:

"Doesn't that frighten you?"

She shook her head:

"No, because you are much too frightened yourself, Gabriel. . . ."

I almost leapt at her as she left the room. She went as far as the landing, but not, as I had at first thought, with the idea of escaping from me, for I heard her call Mathilde's name in a firm voice.

The stairs creaked under the younger girl's light tread. I was standing as far as possible from the window, and Mathilde did not at first see me when she came into the room. I heard her speak:

"Are you there, Gabriel?"

Adila closed the door.

"Gabriel and I cannot wait any longer to tell you the great news. . . . You promised me that you would tell Mathilde yourself. . . ."

The girl must have at first believed that I had just been speaking of what had occurred between us, and that Adila had countered by announcing her own engagement.

"So we've both of us found happiness"—she said with a smile. . . . "Who is he, Adila? do tell me . . . do I know him?"

"Can't you guess, darling? He is here in the room with us."

She was feeling her way. I heard Mathilde reply—I felt as though I was dreaming:

"But . . . you must be joking!"

I was waiting for the final blow to fall, when, suddenly, the girl flung a question at me:

"This isn't true, Gabriel, is it?"

I brought out my answer with difficulty:

"I sincerely hope not. . . ."

In a completely colourless voice, as though she were repeating a lesson, Adila assured her cousin that we were engaged, and that I could not deny it. Mathilde's voice hissed rather than spoke:

"Is she laughing at you? . . . Answer! . . . Say something!" I made a vague gesture of denial. I heard Mathilde's breathless words without attaching any significance to them.

My mind remained a blank for what seemed an age. Then understanding returned. I could grasp what she was saying in a voice that trembled with emotion:

"It's as clear to me as daylight. It never occurred to you that *I* should be such a fool . . . but you knew that *she'd* consent. . . . The only thing *you* cared about was worming your way into the family in any way you could. I should never have believed you capable of such cold-blooded calculation, Gabriel!"

The memory of Adila's expression will remain with me for ever.

"Who would have thought it!" said her cousin. Certainly, to anyone who knew the facts of my life, Mathilde's incredulity must have seemed highly comic.

"Don't worry! *I* shan't try to get him away from you. It would be easy enough if I wanted to. But you can keep him, my dear!"

And then she said again, in a sort of semi-patois:

"Keep 'un!"

Adila moved away from the wall. She had closed her eyes and said very quickly:

"It's not a question of me . . . but . . . we've got a little boy. He's called Andrès, and he's five years old. . . ."

Mathilde stood there as though stunned. "You? . . . A child?" —She muttered, and burst out laughing.

At last she left the room, stumbling as she went, and we heard her collapse in the corridor. I made for the door, but Adila roughly pushed me back. It would have been dangerous to resist her at that moment. I left her on her knees by the body, supporting her cousin's head, and went downstairs without once looking back.

The puddles were cold under my feet. The garden-path glimmered white, but, even so, I kept on losing it and bumping against the trees. I know beyond a shadow of doubt that I have never been nearer to killing myself than then. But a muffled, fretful voice kept on repeating: "No, you're too great a coward," as though someone were speaking who was not sure of himself. It is true: I *am* a coward, and it sometimes happens that, of all our vices, cowardice is the one which proves, as often as not, to be our salvation. I went back to the house through the darkness. I was soaked to the skin, famished, and with blood on my hands; but, unfortunately, I was alive: only too much alive!

I must really hurry, my dear sir, or you'll never have the patience to follow my story to the end. Next morning, Mathilde went away, and Adila became once more the indifferent, passive, resigned creature whom I had found on my return to Liogeats. Our marriage was not, after all, celebrated in the village. I received a number of abominable letters signed by war-widows and seriously wounded men. People came and rattled tin kettles under the windows of the chateau. I had to make my escape by car, under cover of darkness, and take the train at a distant station. Adila joined me in Paris where we were married in the presence of no one but our witnesses. A few weeks later Mathilde married Symphorien Desbats.

I had insisted on a settlement by the terms of which all property should be held in common. Adila obeyed my demands without

discussion. With complete disregard for Andrès' interests, she agreed to have a large number of her trees felled, to sell part of her land, and to have the money paid into my account. I drafted a Will, and she signed it. Not that there was any reason to think that she would die. I don't want you to think . . . to suspect. . . . She fell a victim to influenza rather more than a year after the Armistice, just when the doctors seemed to be getting the epidemic under control. She made what you priests call "a good death," but without any fuss or bother. I did, however, hear through the door something that she said. Her thoughts were entirely of me, and she did not so much as mention her son's name. It is, you must admit, an odd sort of faith that entails redemption by suffering, and the sacrifice of a life that is not ours to give. . . . But, then, perhaps the truth always is odd. . . . I don't suppose you would believe me, would you, if I told you that I actually shed tears, and that I think of her as of someone who is still alive, still part of my existence?

Naturally, no sooner was I free than Aline was all for marrying me. But, as she very soon realized, I would rather have done a stretch of hard labour than make her my wife. She became quite pitiless in her levying of blackmail, and I had to go for help to Symphorien Desbats.

You know what he is like. At that time he was already a sick man. It wasn't, as they say, any excess of sentiment that made him short of breath. Had Mathilde married a man like me she would at least have known the meaning of love. . . . True, her awakening would have been terrible, but for some weeks, perhaps even for some months, she would have known the meaning of love. You can guess the sort of married life she had. Still, she did produce a daughter, Catherine, though no sooner was the child born than she found her place already filled. When Adila died, Mathilde had written that she would like to take full responsibility for Andrès, and he has been tied to her apron-strings ever since.

Symphorien Desbats summed me up at the first glance. Not that he was capable of sounding the confused depths of my character. To imagine what a man of my sort is really like would be quite beyond his powers. He saw me as a mere product of the gutter, and, so far as the matter in hand was concerned, it was the best thing he could do. I had inherited from Adila all the money that the Law allows a testator to leave away from a son in the interests of a husband. The demands made upon me by Aline—and also, I must confess, the kind of life I was leading (what a life!)—compelled me, before long, to fell what remained of my pines, first the older trees, then those in full yield. One day, in Paris, Symphorien Desbats came to see me. He told me that I was ruining the property, and that I had better hand over the management of it to him. He would guarantee me an adequate income. He began by advancing all the money I asked for. I will spare you the story of the various tricks he played in order to get me to sell him my woods which, of course, marched with his. As Andrès grew up, he had recourse to a line of action which, no doubt, justified me in my own eyes . . . (as though a man like me needs justification!—but I do, where my son's future is in question), but which, more important still, left Mathilde, his wife, without the power to resist. For Mathilde championed Andrès against me as though he had been her own child. You know her well enough by this time to realize how much fonder she is of him than of Catherine. I remember how furious she was with her husband when she realized that he was making use of my perpetual need of money in order to strip me bare.

But Desbats countered her indignation by arguing that, since there was no way of keeping me from selling my land to the first bidder, it was very much better to prevent it from going out of the family. The only way of ensuring that Andrès' future should not be jeopardized was to arrange for him and Catherine to be engaged, so that he might be certain of recovering by marriage

what his father had surrendered for ready cash. There was nothing intrinsically absurd about the scheme, because, from their earliest years, Andrès and Catherine had been inseparable. There seemed to be no good reason for thinking that Symphorien was not acting in perfect good faith. He had that love of land which leads men to dread above all things the breaking up of estates among a number of heirs, and is the reason why, in France, we see so many marriages between blood-relations. What it all came to was this: that he was forking out money to keep my land in the family. Sooner or later, Andrès would get control of the property.

In this way Desbats made sure of his wife's neutrality in a campaign which had as its object the buying up by degrees of everything that stood in my name. Andrès' ownership of the two tenant-farms of Cernes and Balizaou remained undisturbed. He had inherited them from his mother, and they were entirely outside my power to control. They amounted, in round figures, to about 2,500 acres. But why, if Desbats is really planning to marry our two children, is he going to all this trouble in order to get his hands on what remains of the boy's patrimony? Why should he saddle himself with legal charges so as to get possession of what, in the ordinary course of events, will be my son's marriage portion? That is what I can't understand, and, believe me, it gives me a considerable headache! I know that since he has become half paralysed, his passion for land has taken on the form of a regular mania. It's impossible to argue with him. . . . He goes so far as to say that the clinching of the bargain is a necessary preliminary to the match. He is bringing every kind of pressure on me to persuade Andrès to sell. I don't know whether you realize it, but, odd sort of father that I am—and by this time you should have a pretty clear idea of what I'm like—I do completely dominate that boy of mine, though I've never taken the slightest interest in him since the day he was born, and he never sees me except when I

come back to Liogeats with the sole object of replenishing my pockets with money which, in fact, I have stolen from him. My power to exercise charm has certainly not stopped short of my son! He is my latest conquest, and I am busy exploiting him as I have always exploited others—with this difference, that I happen to be very fond of him.

He will do everything I ask him, though he, too, has the land in his blood. But, in his case, the passion is neither mean nor grasping. He lacks the instinct of possession. But, as though to make up for its absence, he has inherited from his mother a keen interest in the welfare of his tenants. He keeps a watchful eye on all that concerns them . . . he's "on their side"—to quote a malicious saying of his employer—and employer is the right word, seeing that what he has really become is the public-spirited bailiff of Symphorien Desbats. Not satisfied with owning most of the Du Buch property, this old fox is now treating the last male descendant of the line as a species of domestic servant. . . . And Andrès puts up with it all because he thinks himself as good as married to Catherine. He is prepared to fall in with what he regards as a sick man's whim, and will part with Balizaou and Cernes at a rock-bottom price in order to cut the legal dues to the lowest possible figure. He is the more ready to do this because Desbats has taken a solemn oath that he will fix the date of the wedding as soon as the business has finally been put through. But I want him to hang on to the farms. I am perfectly well aware that, if the deal goes through, I stand to pocket a commission—the purchase-price was arranged between Desbats and me—and the boy, who knows how hard-pressed I am, has promised to let me have the proceeds of the sale on loan at 5 per cent. . . . But how can I be sure that the whole thing isn't a trap, that the old man won't refuse to have the boy as his son-in-law once he's fleeced him? How can one trust the word of a man like that unless it's been duly sworn in front of a lawyer? The real trouble is that

Aline is becoming more and more exorbitant in her demands. In days gone by I had several strings to my bow . . . but I am getting older with every month and every week that passes. . . .

Well, things can't be much worse for me than they are already, and I am not going to be a party to seeing the boy robbed. . . . He's got to hang on to Cernes and Balizaou . . . at least until the marriage is an accomplished fact. Besides, present loss is future gain. Once I'd touched my commission and got that loan out of Andrès, there'd be nothing for me to fall back on. . . . Perhaps I'd better throw myself on Desbat's mercy . . . he may be able to settle Aline for me . . . unless, of course, he makes use of what I've told him in confidence to cook my goose for good and all, and makes it an excuse for calling the marriage off. . . . Only you, Monsieur l'Abbé, only you . . .

I

THE man laid down his fountain-pen, read through what he had written, and got up. He was wearing a dressing-gown of blue silk, much torn and stained. His dark, tanned face looked young in spite of his silvery hair. Probably his light-coloured, sharp eyes had not changed much since his boyhood. A melancholy daylight filtered through the dirty windows, that Paris daylight which one waits impatiently to see fade before closing the flimsy iron shutters which have a way of nipping one's fingers. The furniture dated from 1925. The passing years had not improved the distempered wall or the objects of glass and nickel that stood about the room. Nothing would change their look of raw newness until the next world-upheaval. Nevertheless, the general impression made by the place was one of untidiness, not the untidiness that makes a house look lived-in, but, rather, the sort of abandonment that broods over ruins. A tray with the remains of a cold meal had been dumped on the floor. Cigarette-ends lay about everywhere. It was obvious that no one had done any cleaning for several days.

Gabriel Gradère lay down on the divan which served him as a bed. 'What point is there in writing all this?' he said to himself. 'What can that wretched priest do to help? . . . Besides, I *won't* see him, I *won't* make his acquaintance, I *won't* let him come meddling in my secrets!'

A child on the floor above began to practise scales. Gradère was conscious of a feeling of relief, for he hated silence. It was as though silence had a life of its own, as though it breathed. The atmosphere of the room was heavy, fusty and used-up. He felt he could not stay there a moment longer. . . . Hurriedly he took off his dressing-gown and put on his clothes. What a relief to slam

the door behind him, to turn the key in the lock as though he were imprisoning within the walls of this room in the rue Emile-Zola the mortal enemy of his life and of life in general.

It was the time of day when all the street-lamps go on at once. He walked quickly. His movements were those of a young man, and very characteristic. It was as though he had wings on his heels. He bought a paper. He felt like a man who is throwing somebody off his tracks. Who, seeing him there, could have put a name to him? He crossed the Seine and followed the tram-lines as far as the Porte d'Auteuil. He passed a Café. In summer the tables outside would have been thronged with people, but there was no one there now. He did not feel the cold: he never did. A Pernod. . . . One can never be quite sure that it will produce the hoped-for state of mental bliss. . . . Sometimes it opens a way of escape . . . but alcohol is equally capable of adding to one's sense of misery, of putting a fine edge on despair. . . . But this particular Pernod would brim with mercy, would make it possible for him to go home with all his fears allayed, to lie down and close his eyes. He would save money by having no dinner. He would go out later, sit at the table where the same woman was to be found each evening at the *Florence*, and would order a sandwich for which she would pay, plus a bottle of Champagne. Nevertheless, he shivered slightly in the damp night air. A breath of the country, smelling of leaves and mould, drifted over the Quarter. He hurried home.

'Heavens!' he said to himself: 'I quite forgot to switch off the lights!' . . . "Aline! . . . What on earth are you doing here? You know I told you not to come and see me. . . ."

The woman, who lay crumpled up on the divan, made no movement. She was smoking. An empty bottle of port stood beside her. She had perched her hat on the head of a Buddha standing on the mantelpiece. Her large face looked as though it

had been plastered all over with flour. It was thickly painted but had not been washed. Two fuddled, watery eyes peered out at him from super-imposed layers of make-up. A line of purplish lip-stick marked the position of the slit which did service for a mouth. Her skirt, pulled above her knees, revealed a pair of still handsome legs in imitation silk stockings.

"I don't care what you told me. I've got a key, haven't I? I'm sick of waiting: I've been doing nothing else for two months. . . ."

She had kept her Bordeaux accent. Gabriel sat down beside her, lit a cigarette, and, in whining, humble tones said:

"But there's nothing I can do, Aline . . . I have to be content with one meal a day. . . ."

"You can touch the kid, can't you?"

He interrupted her roughly:

"You leave the kid out of it! I'm not going to rob Andrès. That's something I won't do. I've said no to that once, and I say it again!"

"But he's perfectly willing . . ."

"All the more reason for not abusing his goodness of heart. . . ."

"But his marriage depends on the deal. You've got Desbats' promise, and he's never gone back on his word yet. . . ."

Gabriel shook his head but made no reply.

"Find some other way, then. . . . Doesn't matter to me if the kid's done down. . . . You'll have to come to it sooner or later, you old twister. You know perfectly well there's nothing else you *can* do. But meanwhile . . ."

She dwelt on the ends of her words in a kind of sing-song. He was standing by the radiator, looking at her—forcing himself to look at her. He must finish once and for all with this woman . . . chuck her out. Why not to-night? She couldn't make her threats good . . . it would be too dangerous. The last thing in the world she wanted was to attract the attention of the police.

"I know what you're thinking," she said suddenly. He gave a start. She asked him for a cigarette and stretched out a hand with spatulate fingers. The red nails had the effect of accentuating its grubbiness.

"You're telling yourself I shan't do anything. Well, my lad, you're wrong. . . . There's a lot you don't know."

Aline had made him sit down beside her, so that she could speak with the advantage of close proximity.

"Suppose that someone you've treated pretty badly . . . someone whose life you've smashed, as the saying goes . . . someone you've dishonoured . . . someone pretty high up who doesn't care what he spends . . . has sworn to get even with you, no matter how much it costs. . . ."

"I don't know who you're talking about"—he stammered. But, at once, several names came to his mind. "In any case," he went on in a more determined voice, "if the gentleman in question's going to get even with me, I shan't take the knock by myself, that I swear. . . . It's no use your trying to come it over me like that. . . ."

"Silly boy! What d'you take me for?"

She chuckled, keeping her mouth closed so as not to show her teeth.

"The day he starts getting busy it'll be time for me to pack up. The gentleman in question, as you call him, has accepted all my conditions. He's prepared to maintain me abroad . . . in some nice quiet little place. . . . Don't you believe me?"

"No, because if what you're saying were true, you'd have swallowed the bait already . . . I don't suppose it's out of any love for me that . . ."

"It certainly isn't, my pet! The truth is, I've got settled into my little ways here. Travelling doesn't tempt me. Paris is the only place one can live really well in. . . . I'm not trying to come it over you. It's all to my interest that you and I should reach a friendly

agreement, but you've got to play *your* part . . . you've got to do the right thing by me."

She spoke calmly, without any show of anger. This sort of bargaining was second nature to her.

He put a question, but did not sound at all sure of himself.

"This fellow you're talking about—I suppose it's the Marquis—eh?"

"No good trying to hide anything from you! Just do a bit of thinking for a change . . . those letters of his wife's . . . the amount you made him cough up. . . . But it's not just a question of the dough . . . you know what that woman meant to him. . . . The woman you stole and dragged through every kind of dirt . . . and then his daughter's marriage which was broken off as a result. . . . The girl's become a nervous wreck. . . . Potty'd be nearer the mark, I should say . . . she's had to be shut up."

"It was you made me do it. . . . Besides," he added quickly, "if it hadn't been me it would have been someone else. . . . What's the use of going over all that again?"

"I'm not going over anything. It was you who started in on this. . . . Well, what about it?"

This time he answered in an entirely different tone of voice:

"I'm off to Liogeats to-morrow . . . you'd better clear out now. But don't run away with the idea that I believe you. . . . The Marquis de Dorth has a horror of scandal . . . knows too much about it. . . . He'd pay through the nose rather than have anything to do with a woman of your sort. . . ."

She was not in the least put out:

"You don't really think, do you, that he honours me with his presence? Everything's done on the q.t. through a third party. He means to get even with you all right, but it'll be managed very quietly, without any fuss or bother. . . ."

He pushed her, resisting, towards the door.

"Why not send a telegram? I've got to have some money at once. . . ."

"No, something's still to be fixed up about the commission. But the important thing is that I must have a definite assurance that Andrès' marriage is going through before I take any definite steps. . . ."

She wrapped herself in an old moth-eaten fur cloak.

"I'll give you a week. . . . If, next Monday, at this time . . . I'm quite a decent sort, now aren't I?"

As soon as he was alone, Gabriel opened the window and breathed in the damp air. He swung round sharply. He could have sworn that somebody had called his name from the corner of the room. But there was no one there. Aline's warmth was still heavy on the air. The place was full of her smell, saturated with the stench of her gross body. He shut the window, and said, out loud:

"There's no one here. . . ."

His roving eyes took in the walls, the ceiling, the carpet. Suddenly, in a mood of feverish haste, he snatched up his hat, his overcoat. . . . Once again he set out aimlessly along the Quays—deserted at this hour. Though he was oppressed by an immense weariness, his stride was rapid, youthful, almost winged.

II

THE local train, after prolonged whistling, got itself into motion and ran on until it came to a stop in Liogeats station. It was ten o'clock at night. Gabriel, a felt hat pulled low over his face, gave up his ticket to the porter, and then, instead of crossing the booking-hall which was filled with people who had come to buy their evening papers, took a path

that led round behind the station. Threading his way between stacks of planks standing in the yard of the saw-mill, he reached the moonlit road.

The bag which he was carrying in his right hand was not heavy. This particular road was known locally as the "Boulevard" because it circled the little town which, at this hour, was already asleep. To his left the pines pressed in upon it. The milky darkness, dripping through their high crests, ran down the scaly trunks and flowed over the rough tangle of brushwood at their feet. To his right lay the town, hidden now by the mist rising from the river-bed and the low-lying pastures. It seemed more silent than the forest whence came the occasional cry of some night-prowling animal, and, at intervals, the sound of a falling cone. But the townspeople, worn out after the day's work, were fast asleep in their lairs. The merged breathing of the exhausted human herd was inaudible.

The road crossed the Balion. Gabriel could hear its water flowing over the pebbly bed with the unbroken murmur to which he had listened as a child. . . . All around him stretched that world of material things which, though they pass no judgment on our actions, still work upon us, wakening regrets and longings, no matter what those actions may have been. How deep, how sweet were the unconscious influences of the night!

He was walking, now, more slowly. So long as he kept to the road that lay before him white in the moon, his shadow, broken by recurrent piles of flints, roused no more sense of loathing in the earth than if it had belonged to the young priest whom, on the mad impulse of a moment, he had wished to take into his confidence. He could see the house in which the Abbé lived, gleaming, white as a leper, at a turn of the road, of that same Liogeats road where once he had run and scampered in the carefree gaiety of childhood, that road which did not know what it was that had brought him back to this country scene. . . . Was he himself sure

what his reasons for coming had been? Had not every step in his progress been determined by obscure promptings? Ostensibly he was there to attend the sale of Cernes and Balisaou. But had not this journey of his, undertaken on the spur of the moment, been dictated by quite other motives? What secret and irreparable deed was he about to do in this remote corner of the world, where, on just such a night, he had been born, in a mean room, fifty years before?

The lessons of experience left him no excuse for self-deception. Such sudden and unpremeditated flittings had always, for him, marked the launching or completion of some scheme. He had a vague feeling that he was poised for action, that he was like a stone held in a clenched fist, inert as the pebble which, the next moment, a child will fling at some harmless beast. Never before had he been so acutely aware of this terrible state of passivity.

In spite of the mist rising from the Balion, he leaned over the parapet, and looked down at the diaphanous wisps of vapour, hearing the murmur of the stream. The water had a smell all its own that came neither from sewage nor drowned grasses, a barely perceptible scent which he had noticed even in the days of his childhood—his smirched and far from innocent childhood. Yet now the night set moving within him freshets of goodness and of love that nothing had impaired. . . . A sudden yearning came on him to make some gesture, perform some action, which should be at odds with his manifest destiny. But what good deed was possible on this empty road and in this sleeping world? There was no traveller lying in the ditch whom he might tend and succour, not so much as a numbed and frozen bird for him to revive.

Nevertheless, the feeling was there, the stirring of one of those impotent good intentions with which Hell is said to be paved. The ebb and flow of the whole wide world moved within him—the milky darkness, redolent of damp and chastity, the unseeing

stream running between its banks and holding no memory of his childish feet in the days when he had caught crayfish with the Du Buch girls. . . . Lucky for him that these mist-drenched fields could remember nothing!

It was growing colder now, and he resumed his walk. At a turn in the road, just where the "Boulevard" meets the lane leading to the chateau, he saw before him the leprous ghastliness of the priest's house. Within those walls the young man lay asleep to whom he had wanted to tell the story of his life. . . . What madness! He, too, must be stretched upon his bed, stripped of his black robe, worn out with physical fatigue and misery of heart, no different from the parishioners who tormented him, made one with them by the same exhaustion, covered by the same pall of night that lay above them all. . . . This graveyard of the living was but a foretaste of that other graveyard where all would meet, tormentors and victim alike, on the edge of the little town.

Was the priest's sister there too, in spite of calumnies and persecution? Gabriel looked up. The moon was shining full upon the closed shutters which showed as blotches of green against the peeling walls.

What was that lying on the steps in front of the door? He gazed with curiosity at the scatter of freshly-cut boughs, with, here and there, the sheen of laurel leaves. It was a local custom thus to adorn the threshold of newly-wed lovers on their marriage-night. . . . Suddenly he realized the significance of the cruel, malicious joke. The parish was playing an ugly trick on its priest. Next morning when he left the house on his way to early Mass, this carpet of brushwood would tell him what the people of Liogeats thought of him and of the bit of skirt whom he was passing off as his sister! The day starts early at Liogeats. Even though the priest said Mass at half-past six, there would be watching eyes at shuttered windows, nasty little urchins behind the poplars on the road. At present the tormentors were asleep. Only the moon at its

zenith gazed down on the unhappy earth—and on nothing more unhappy than these boughs and laurel branches lying on the doorstep of a country priest.

Gabriel had an inspiration. He put down his bag among the nettles that grew at the foot of the low wall which separated the road from the priest's garden at the back of the house. He looked about him and listened. Not a dog was barking. He could hear only the occasional crowing of a cock cheated by the moon. He took up great armfuls of the scattered boughs and threw them over the low wall. In spite of the damp chill of the night air, he grew warm as he worked. When little remained to be done, he picked up the few remaining branches, one by one, until all had been removed. Then, slightly out of breath, he leaned for a moment against a poplar opposite the house before going on his way. The threshold, cleared of all encumbrance, looked naked under the moon. The middle of the stone steps had been worn into a depression by the feet of all those, the living and the dead, who had come this way to knock upon the door. In the moonlit darkness the old stones seemed more expressive than a human face. They quivered with a sort of muted life. The man whose impure hands had swept them bare felt suddenly as though they were looking at him. The impression lasted only for a moment. Then he took his bag, and turned sharply to his left into the avenue leading to the chateau.

III

THE ground-mist hid the fields. Beyond the lake of low-lying fog the great pines of Frontenac, set on a high mound, may have remembered what they had seen and heard. Bergère barked, and Gabriel called "Tuchau, Bergère!"

Already in imagination he could feel the bitch's paws against his chest, her tongue warm on his neck and chin.

There was a sound of shutters being thrown back.

"Qu'ès aco?"

"It's me, Gercinthe: me, Monsieur Gabriel. . . ."

The old woman cried down that she would be with him in a moment. He waited, sitting on his suitcase. A key turned in the lock of the kitchen door.

"So it's you?"

The deaf old creature looked at him with a suspicious eye. She alone of all the domestic staff slept at the chateau. The two young maids, daughters of one of the tenant farmers, and a manservant, lived at the farm and had their evening meal there.

The light dazzled Gabriel. He explained that, as usual, the train had been an hour late, that he had had no dinner and was as hungry as a hunter. Already Gercinthe was throwing pine-cones and shavings on the embers, and beginning to fuss. What did he want to eat? "There's not much left." She detested Gradère, but it was part of her religion to see that her masters were properly fed.

"Anything you've got!" said Gabriel.

She brought the remains of a *paté-de-foie-gras* and some cold chicken: "only the carcase, but it might be worse. . . ."

He ate slowly, feeling a deep sense of security and well-being. Paris was far away, and Aline, and the hideous life he had been leading. . . . There was no one now to prod at him.

"Everyone well?"

Gercinthe embarked on a tale of woe. Monsieur Desbats had had one of his attacks . . . was down again with that asthma of his. . . . No one but his daughter could do anything for him. . . . Proper devoted, that was what Miss Catherine was . . . and him just a mass of nerves.

"A terrible thing that there asthma . . . but the sight of you'll

quiet him down. They've been waiting for you so's they can get on with the marriage." Then, in a low voice, as though speaking to herself as she fussed round the table, she added:

"Tricky as a bagful of monkeys he be!"

Gradère stopped eating and gave her a shrewd look.

"What are you hinting at—that he doesn't want Catherine to marry the boy?"

She fell to muttering:

"Don't 'ee go putting words into my mouth. *I* didn't say nowt o' that!"

"And how's Andrès?"

"Allus on the move. This week he's been a-counting of the pines over to Jouanhaut, them as Monsieur Desbats has sold to Mouleyre. . . . Here be Madam. . . ."

The woman who had just come into the room, her full figure wrapped in a purple dressing-gown, was indeed Mathilde. Her thick hair, hurriedly piled on top of her head, left visible a high, lustreless forehead, and gave her an old fashioned appearance. Her rather hollow cheeks were of an unhealthy yellow, but her neck and the swell of her breast, visible beneath the loosely fastened gown, had the whiteness of a flower-petal. Gabriel had risen. He alone in all the world could see in this mature, this almost heavy, woman the slim, birdlike girl whom he had loved.

It was Mathilde, and that, for him, meant always Mademoiselle Du Buch. In her presence he became once more just "young Gradère," the peasant lad from the Péloueyres, the boy whom Adila and Mathilde had always addressed in the second person singular, while he never departed from a respectful "mamiselle."

"Sure you're not still hungry? We ought to have a serious talk, now, this evening, if you're not too sleepy. Go to bed, Gercinthe. The clearing up can wait until to-morrow morning. Don't worry about anything. I'll put the fire-guard on. Hurry up, now!"

She spoke firmly and calmly, like one who is accustomed to being obeyed.

"Draw up to the fire, the nights are getting cold."

It caused her no emotion to find herself, thus circumstanced, in the great kitchen at Liogeats where, as children, they had watched preserves simmering in the copper saucepans, and across which they had scampered to crouch in the concealment of the scullery while Adila looked for them in the garden, and cried out—"Mind, no hiding in the house!" At such moments he had always pressed her hand, and they had stayed where they were, speechless from sheer happiness.

Of these things she had retained no memory. The look she fixed on him was at once preoccupied and indifferent. He did not inspire in her even feelings of disgust. He would rather have seen her tremble at the recollection of that day when Adila had told her of their engagement. But nothing was more foreign to Mathilde's nature than to chew over and ruminate, as he did to excess, the events of the past. . . . What secrets had Adila confided to her as she lay dying? Whatever they may have been, they were now, if not forgotten, at least buried deep in her mind. It was as though that part of her life had been wiped away, finished, killed. All that counted with this woman were the concerns, the people, of the present.

"You did well to come . . . but there must be no false move! Symphorien is talking more than ever about going through with the marriage. It seems to me as though it were all a little *too* easy. He is *too* gay: there is something almost suspect in his gaiety."

"He is a very sick man."

"Yes, I know, but sometimes I wonder. I was reading the other day in the *Petit Parisien* of a man who made believe that he was very ill. . . . There are times when Symphorien is deaf, so deaf that one has to shout at him, and then, quite suddenly, he will

hear something said in quite a low voice. He is paralysed all down one side and can scarcely walk . . . but at times he runs about the house as nimbly as a rat! All we know for certain is that he is asthmatic and has overtaxed his heart. Of course, Dr. Clairac . . . Shall I tell you what I think? . . . I think he's got some sort of a hold over Dr. Clairac. There was rather an ugly story about an accident to one of the farm-hands, and Symphorien helped to clear him. I've got an idea that he tells Dr. Clairac what he wants his diagnosis to be. . . . On the other hand, I don't very well see how he *can* stop Andrès' marriage now that things have gone so far. But he's such a maniac where land is concerned that he'd do everything in his power to hang on, during his lifetime, to what he calls the "two last provinces" which have not, as yet, been absorbed into the estate, those two "fairest jewels in his crown," Cernes and Balisaou. It's become a perfect obsession with him."

Gabriel stifled a yawn.

"Then he'd better make up his mind. . . ."

"Yes, but the first thing we've got to do is to insist on the marriage contract being signed the same day as . . ."

She stared into the fire, rubbing her knees, the while, with a sort of mechanical movement. Gabriel was becoming sleepy. He could feel Bergère's warm nose against his hand. The ticking of the clock was barely audible. How far away Paris seemed, and Aline! He could hear in the chimney the sound of the wind among the pines, a prolonged moaning that neither rose nor fell, and seemed at last to make one with the silence.

"Listen to me Gabriel."

He gave a start. Mathilde had transferred her gaze to his face. She sat there with her handsome, but rather too large hands clasped on her lap. The wide sleeves of her dressing-gown revealed a pair of firm and powerful arms.

"Swear to me that he has not promised you any commission. He's a miser over money, and if he has offered you a large sum on

condition that the deal goes through, that means we've been done. . . ."

Gabriel assured her in honeyed tones that Desbats had made him no such promise.

"Is that really the truth? You're not lying to me?"

He felt the implied insult and seemed about to turn restive; but Mathilde merely shrugged her shoulders:

"It's a waste of time to try that sort of thing on with me. . . ."

"You despise me, don't you?" he asked in a low voice.

"Despise is a big word," she replied in a voice of mockery: "a word for Paris folk. Down here we don't bother our heads about loving, or despising, or all the other things you and your friends think about. The land, the poultry, the pigs are what we worry over . . . everything else can go hang!"

All of a sudden he found that she was getting on his nerves, irritating him, though he did not quite know why. He said:

"If you had nothing else than that to give you an interest in life . . ."

"What else should I have?"

"Andrès, for instance. . . ."

She showed a vague smile.

"Naturally . . . he is much more my son than he is yours or Adila's. . . . After all, you gave him to me, didn't you? Yes, I certainly have him. . . ."

She had risen, but sat down again to talk about Andrès. Her face was radiant with happiness. The immense whispering of the pines did not break the silence. But the old sweet-smelling kitchen no longer brought to Gabriel a sense of security. He had lost the feeling of being hidden away from the dangers of life. It was as though somebody had suddenly come into the room, though the door was shut; somebody who had lost track of him since he had left Paris, but had followed post-haste and had at last succeeded in

coming up with him. Perhaps it was "he" again. Was it? Bergère was fast asleep, her muzzle between her paws. Hams were hanging from the beams. On the shelves of the dresser, adorned with scalloped paper, there was a glint of copper pans and kettles. No, the kitchen had ceased to be an island of the past to which he could flee for refuge. All the horrors of his daily existence had suddenly burst in upon their silence. Had a footstep sounded in the garden, had a hand pushed open the door, it would not have surprised him to see Aline there before him, clutching her old fur coat about her shapeless body. In a flash everything had changed. But Mathilde seemed not to notice any difference. She sat there playing absent-mindedly with her wedding ring, her arm bare to the elbow.

"Are you really sure, my dear, that you are working for Andrès' happiness?"

She looked at him with surprise:

"Of course. Why do you ask?"

"Because it doesn't seem to occur to you to wonder whether Andrès will be happy with Catherine. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but this daughter of yours . . ."

"Oh," she exclaimed with a smile, "my feelings aren't hurt, not the least little bit in the world. Catherine is ugly, it's no good pretending she isn't—but she's no fool. Reserved, sulky, and not in the least brilliant, perhaps, but what of it? All that's true enough, but it doesn't alter the fact that she may be just the wife he needs. It has been an understood thing ever since they were children. The land is what Andrès cares about more than anything else. The estate is his whole life—after his football. Down here, you know, men don't expect their wives to be marvels of intelligence and beauty. So long as they know how to bring up their children, so long as they are neat and clean . . . though in those ways I don't deny that Catherine has still got a deal to learn. I'm afraid, too, that she has no fondness for animals, and

doesn't take much interest in the poultry. . . . But all that will come later. . . . Besides, I shall be there."

"Yes, you will be there."

"Of course I shall. What's in your mind?—come, out with it," she said drily. "Are you afraid I may disturb the happiness of the young couple? Do you think they'll want to live in a perpetual intimacy of two? You can make your mind easy on that score. They have known one another all their lives, and there's not likely to be much romance between them. People here don't carry on like turtle-doves—that's not our country way. Nothing will be changed. . . ."

"Except that they'll be sleeping in the same room."

"Naturally."

"And in the same bed."

"All right, then—in the same bed!" She repeated his phrase with a show of impatience. "You're too complicated for the likes of us!"

These words she spoke jokingly, but Gabriel detected a note of suffering in her voice. It was as though he were holding a pigeon in his hands and pressing it rather too tightly.

"My dear Mathilde, do you really expect me to believe that you're a simple soul?"

She rose with a quick movement:

"All this is just talk. . . . Do you remember that when you were a child my mother used to say that you were a great hand at talking nonsense? . . . You go on ahead, I'll put out the lamps."

Suddenly the kitchen was empty of all light save what came from the dying fire. The copper pans caught a momentary flicker, and then went dim. Bergère's tail could be heard thumping the flagstones of the floor. The hall smelled of mould and linen. Cloaks and sun-bonnets filled the great press. Gabriel turned sharply:

"And what about Catherine?"

"How do you mean—what about Catherine?"

Mathilde sounded cross. She spoke like someone in a hurry to get to bed.

"Is she happy?"

"Why shouldn't she be happy?—what a question!"

"Have you asked her?"

"There's no reason why I should ask her. She has always known that this marriage was a foregone conclusion. . . . Not happy at the idea of marrying André! . . . Why, you must be crazy!"

"What is she like with him? How does she behave?"

"They do everything together, as they always have done. Really, you've become very stupid, my poor dear!"

They tip-toed up the stairs.

"Don't make a noise," she said: "Symphorien's a light sleeper; very different from André. He wouldn't wake if the house fell down!"

"Is he still in the green room? Since there's no danger of waking him I'll just slip in and give him a kiss. . . . You coming?"

He was holding the door half open.

"Wait a moment," she whispered: "I'll light the bedside lamp."

The boat-shaped bed was hung with curtains printed in a design of red and green. At first, Gradère could see nothing but the huge, inflated eiderdown. The room was so stuffy that he could scarcely breathe. 'How typical!' he thought. 'Country folk never open their windows at night!'

"He's got too much on his bed," murmured Mathilde. "It's always been a mania with him ever since he was a child. I don't mind betting he's in a regular sweat," she added, taking off the eiderdown.

Gabriel looked at his sleeping son. The boy's face was flushed. A black smudge of beard accentuated the colour in his cheeks. He was not wearing pyjamas, but an old-fashioned hem-stitched night-shirt. His forehead was damp and caught the light. "The

very image of his mother,' thought Gabriel: 'but in him it shows as good looks. . . .'

Andrès stirred, and his hand felt for the eiderdown.

"In summer he goes to the opposite extreme," said Mathilde: (she spoke with the fondness of a mother to whom everything that concerns her child has an exaggerated importance). "He can't stand anything on his bed, not even a sheet. Sometimes I have to cover him up, because even in August it's chilly about dawn, because of the stream. . . ."

"Soon there won't be any need for you to bother. . . ."

Gradère had left the room. Moonlight drenched the staircase, making the handrail shine. But it could not penetrate the dark tunnel of the corridor.

"What a lovely night!" sighed Mathilde. "No need for candles. What was that you said?"

"I said that soon you wouldn't have to bother about covering Andrès up when the dawns are chilly. . . . He won't be alone."

He was on the alert for Mathilde's answer, but failed to notice the slight change in her voice when she said:

"Yes, for the first few days after they're married I shall have to be careful not to go into his room. . . . It has become a habit with me."

"One's got to sacrifice something," said Gradère.

"Oh," she said with a laugh, "it won't be any sacrifice. I know only too well that I treat him like a little boy. It's time I stopped."

"He probably feels the same about it. I'm afraid you may get on his nerves a bit. . . ."

"Nonsense!" she protested sharply. "Actually, he's only just a child, even though he is twenty-two. His time in the army didn't change him a tiny bit. He's still very innocent, you know," she added hastily.

"How do you know?"

"I don't mean that he tells me things . . . but in some ways

he is extraordinarily simple. . . . Odd, isn't it, with a father like you?"

Gradère fixed his blue eyes on her:

"Maybe it's you that are simple. . . . You're the last person in whom a young man of twenty-two would confide. . . ."

She broke in on him:

"I said that because I am sure it's true. Don't, please, pretend to know better than me! Besides, at Liogeats nothing can be kept secret for long. If he'd ever had the least bit of an adventure, I should have heard of it the same day. . . . You can take my word for it that nothing of the sort has even so much as entered his head. People like you can't believe that there are men in the world who are not just animals, not just dogs!"

"How violent you are, Mathilde! I didn't mean to be offensive."

"I don't find what you said in the least offensive—why should I?" She was furious. "Come, it's time we were in bed. We'd be much better off there than hanging about talking nonsense. Do you still prefer tea for breakfast?"

"No, not here. The water tastes of earth and limestone. . . . Coffee, please, the same as the rest of you."

A high-pitched voice from the far end of the corridor made them start.

"You're talking too loud: you've woken papa!"

"Is that you, Catherine? How long have you been there?"

Mathilde asked the question in a preoccupied voice.

The newcomer avoided the question.

"Papa heard you. . . . Would you like me to give you a light?"

They blinked in the sudden glare. Gradère looked at the lanky girl. She seemed cold, and was wrapped in a dressing-gown like her mother's, and made of the same purple material. Her face was dark and brooding, though there was in it a wary quality which gave her an animal expression, though it did nothing to lighten

the hard, bony structure. Her thick, lustreless hair was arranged in two plaits and drawn back, revealing a low forehead. She was a true woman of the Landes, one of the little black hens peculiar to that countryside. Her mother looked at her anxiously.

"... I suppose you thoroughly enjoyed listening to us, didn't you?—not that it matters in the least."

Catherine moved her shoulders in a faint shrug. She stared at her slipper which had a hole in it through which her big toe was projecting, and played with the faded ribbon of one of her plaits. Suddenly, addressing herself to Gradère, she said:

"Papa's expecting you to-morrow morning . . . as soon as you are up. . . . He is very pleased that you have come."

"Are you pleased, too, Catherine?"

"Oh, I! . . ."

Her gesture seemed to imply that what she felt was of no interest to anybody. Her diminished shadow melted into the gloom of the corridor. Mathilde and Gabriel waited until she had closed the door of her room, which communicated with her father's.

"Do you suppose she overheard what we were saying?" he asked.

"Probably—she's always hanging about . . . and spying. Her father has trained her to act like Bergère . . ."—there was a note of hatred in her voice.

"A pleasant sort of wife for Andrès, eh, Mathilde?"

"Just the wife he needs!"

"True," he replied in dulcet tones: "she'll adore him: she'll be mad about him!"

Mathilde flung him a dry "good-night" and went into her room. Gradère heard the sound of the bolt being shot. He was still laughing when he entered his own room, which had once been Adila's.

A photograph of the dead woman stood on the mantelpiece,

propped against a vase which Mathilde kept filled with roses. Gabriel had stopped laughing. He sat down on the bed and looked about him. There were some bad pastel portraits on the walls, done by old grandpapa Du Buch, and two water-colours, one of Saint Bertrand de Comminges, the other of the Lac d'Oo. A number of religious images were scattered about the room—the Sacred Heart, the Virgin, St. Joseph, and a great brass crucifix on which was hung a Rosary of olive stones which had been much valued by Adila because Pope Pius IX had blessed it. . . . For the second time that evening Gabriel felt at peace. He had never been conscious, in this room of Adila's, of that sense of bodily warmth, as of some invisible presence, which so terrified him in Paris; had never heard the breathing of someone on the watch. On a sudden impulse he got up, opened the wardrobe with the creaking door, took from the bottom shelf an old red flannel cape, and raised it, not to his lips but to his nose. He had a way of sniffing at objects, like a dog. That done, he sat down again on the bed, holding Adila's red cape on his knees, clinging to this piece of flotsam with both hands. The moon went down, mist covered the fields. Every living creature at Liogeats, except only Gabriel Gradère, was fast asleep.

IV

SOMEBODY else was keeping vigil in the house that gleamed with a leper's whiteness, though his eyes were fast shut. The moonlight drifting through the slats of the venetian blinds shone upon untidiness. The room was vast and scantily furnished. The truckle bed was of iron. On the table a scatter of papers showed like snow. What could those objects be upon the floor, looking like two motionless animals? Only a pair of heavy boots caked with mud. A flannel shirt and a soutane

were draped over one of the chairs: Damp patches on the walls assumed in the moonlight the form of continents and islands. The Abbé Forcas could hear overhead the scampering of rats, a sound of gnawing, and an occasional faint squeal. He was thinking not of rats, but of the branches he had found upon his doorstep. . . . Why had he not shifted them? There was still time.

On the previous evening, while reading his Breviary, he had heard, beneath the windows, a noise of muffled laughter, and, creeping close, had seen and understood. He had been filled with the sort of mad rage which comes only to full-blooded fellows of twenty-six. It must be that lout Mouleyre who was responsible, or Pardieu, the wheelwright's son . . . probably egged on by the girls. There were two or three of the latter who hated the lonely young man round whom they snuffled in vain. He had rushed headlong down the stairs, had seized the latch, but then had checked his impulse. Regaining his room, he had knelt down as though his longing to sweep the doorstep clean had been a temptation. But surely it could not be called that? Was it not his duty to forestall a scandal which the return of daylight would reveal? "Did I fear scandal when I was stripped of My garments, bound naked to a pillar, nailed naked to a cross? . . . Not yours to understand, but to resemble Me." Alain Forcas reflected: 'I was talking to myself,' and at once the voice fell silent.

He had undressed in a fury, flinging the soutane from him. Then, he had picked it up again with reverence, and pressed it to his lips. At that moment, standing there, he was just a young man like other young men. He looked smaller than, in fact, he was, because he had a long body and short legs. The rather sullen face with its freckled nose and the low forehead of a young buffalo, spoke not of sauvity but of violence.

In bed, he lay turned to the wall, his hands linked by his Rosary. Should sleep not come at once, it couldn't be helped. He would get up and sweep the doorstep clear. Why must he always

submit? He should have resisted the Dean, should have refused to send Tota away. What right had anyone to forbid him to give shelter to a sister who had been left forlorn and destitute? She had gone back to Paris well-nigh penniless. What sort of life was awaiting her there? "Rootless and lost" she had moaned in a low voice. He thought of the Dean: "a saint, but lacking bowels of pity—one of those who are born without them. . . ." His lips moved: at regular intervals he murmured a woman's name: "*Mary, Mary, Hail Mary. . .*"

He was once more like a little child burying its face in a shoulder. He closed his eyes because his mother was holding him tight. . . . Nothing else mattered to him but to be kept there, not to yield to his desire to go downstairs, to open the door, to sweep away the branches. It was a simple desire to which any man might have felt it his duty to surrender—any *other* man. But such a duty was not for him. He knew the nature of his mission: never to turn aside his head, never to make the gesture of refusal.

In all other ways he had been a failure. Neither with the children nor with the old people would he find a welcome. Here, in this little town, it was not a question of apathy or ignorance, but of active hatred, which, in some, was virulent. He was looked on with a mistrust that had become deep-rooted during the ten years in which two luke-warm priests had held this cure of souls. The inexperience due to his youth had been exploited; his every fault of tactlessness had been exposed to the full light of day; any feeling of affection he might have for one or other of his parishioners had been mocked, or attributed to base motives, until, with the arrival of his sister, the attitude of his neighbours had become one of definite persecution. "You have failed in whatever you have turned your hand to . . . you are incapable of doing anything except endure. . . . Endure, then!"

There might have been the children, the few children of Liogeats, but they had been taken from him on the very evening of

their First Communion. Not one had he kept. Which of them would willingly have been seen speaking to him? 'What cause have you for complaint? Many are the priests who can find none to serve their Mass, whereas you have always little Lassus.' He thought of the boy whose father was unknown, whose mother was in service at Bazas, who lived with an aunt. Very soon now he would be ringing the Angelus, and, as soon as the Abbé entered the church, the first thing he would see would be a pair of wooden clogs standing in the porch, and, close to the altar, a small, cropped head with projecting ears.

But before reaching the church he would have to tread upon those ignominious branches, and cross the Square, watched by malicious eyes—the eyes of those who lived like rutting goats, while he, at twenty-six, was all alone; alone in the daytime, alone in the evening, alone at night . . . one confession every fortnight. He must not stumble nor fall in the interval, if only because of his daily Mass . . . a Mass without listeners, a Mass said in a waste land. 'No, not wholly without listeners. The boy is there, making his responses; and sometimes the old aunt.'

What was Tota doing at this moment? Was she asleep or still trailing about Paris? . . . Those branches. . . . He would get up earlier than usual, so that no human being on the Square should witness his shame. After Mass, during the Thanksgiving, Lassus should sweep the presbytery doorstep.

Alain was breathing gently. Sleep had come at last. There was never anyone to watch him as he slept. He was a young man, like other young men, with a prematurely aged face and fresh lips—an unhappy child. But his consecrated hands crossed upon his breast, made a patch of lightness in the dark.

The Angelus. And he had meant to get up at dawn! It was already full day. He would be seen, watched, as he left the house. He ran to the window and pushed open the shutters. God was good! a thick mist, shot through by the crowing of cocks, hid the

earth. A waggon jolted by a bare stone's throw away, but he could not see it. The mist would cover him like the wings of God. *Scapulis suis obumbrabit tibi: et sub pennis ejus sperabis.* . . . He would leave shaving till after Mass (though he was not one of those priests who have the effrontery to approach the altar uncleansed). He must hurry, so as to reach the church before the sun had dispersed the mist, before God had withdrawn His wing.

But the mist was already lifting when he opened the door, and, suddenly, he saw that the old stones, still wet with dew, were bare. Scarcely venturing to touch them with the soles of his shoes, he stood and stared. Not the trace of a leaf was anywhere near, not the least little twig. . . . But yes, there was *one*, lying between the steps and the wall, as though to assure him that he was not dreaming. He picked it up and crushed it between his fingers. Heavens! it must be young Lassus who had done this!

Alain Forcas reached the church without seeing a soul. Where the nave began, he said a brief prayer. At the sound of his steps the boy had risen from his knees, and now walked before him to the Sacristy. As a rule the priest did not speak to him before Mass. This morning he laid his hand on the cropped head, and smiled down at the thin, ill-nourished face.

"Haven't you had time to wash this morning, Jacquot?" The lad blushed and explained that he had been afraid of being late.

"I know what made you late."

Lassus told him that his aunt's alarm-clock was out of order.

"But the real reason was that you had work to do outside the presbytery, wasn't it?"

What work? He did not know what Monsieur le curé meant. He hadn't been near the presbytery, but had taken the short cut through the Douences' garden . . . as he always did when he was behind time.

Then it hadn't been the boy! There must be one other person

in Liogeats capable of pity! Some member of his flock had been moved by a feeling of compassion for him! 'Maybe he will never reveal himself,' he thought. No matter, this morning's Mass should be said for him. Thus thinking, he approached God's altar which, through every tribulation, was the stay and comfort of his youth.

He walked home slowly, because young Lassus' clogs were clacking at his side, and he had to shorten his stride in order to keep step. The boy was chattering away breathlessly. To hear him the Abbé would have had to lean down. But as yet he could not emerge from his sense of inner peace, from his spirit's silence. The coming day would be full of duties. He would try to visit all the sick of the parish. He fully expected to be welcomed no better than a dog, but he felt sufficiently strong now to bear the mistrust which would be his portion. It was only unexpected blows that made him feel afraid. He knew from experience that this lightness of heart after Mass concealed a threat, that somewhere a snare had been set. No use pretending: he had planned to visit the sick, not from any love of self-sacrifice, but so as to forestall the hidden danger.

Already his inner silence was ebbing, withdrawing, and life was seeping back from all sides. Not for a moment did he lower his guard, but remained on watch for the attack which might come he knew not whence. The branches had not been laid for nothing . . . the insult must be connected with something of which he did not know. He hurried across the Square. The schoolmaster was standing on the steps of the Mairie, deep in conversation with Dupart, the mayor's deputy. The Abbé raised his hat. Only the schoolmaster replied with a lift of his *béret*. Dupart said something in his ear, and laughed. Seeing the presbytery close at hand, the Abbé felt like a hunted fox when he comes within sight of his earth. At that moment he heard the boy say something about Madame Revaux, which was the name of the sister whose

presence here had been for him the cause of so much wretchedness.

"P'r'aps the bit about the hotel at Lugdunos *is* true. No less than three people did see her on market day. . . . But there be some as say as how you do go visiting her, and have been seen in ordinary clothes."

"Is all that gossip *still* going on?" muttered the Abbé, taking his key from his pocket: "why, my sister is in Paris."

But even as he spoke the words, he remembered that she had not once written to him since her departure, and that he had no proof whatever of her having gone to Paris. What the boy had said might be true. On the other hand, what should she be doing all alone at Lugdunos?

"Here's a letter for you, sir," said young Lassus: "twas slipped under the door. . . ."

The hand of innocence held out a yellow envelope to the Abbé. Alain knew precisely what it contained, and might have torn it up without bothering to read what was written. As it was, he stuffed it into his pocket, while the boy busied himself about making coffee.

He waited until he was alone before opening the envelope:

Tartufel everyone at Lugdunos saw you at seven o'clock on Friday, you dirty swine! Tual's commercial had the room next to yours. He may not have seen, but he heard!

More than once, as he read, the young priest paused and caught his breath. He felt as though he were suffocating in the stench that came from the letter in his hand. Then, with a deep sigh, he continued to the end.

V

THAT night Mathilde was unable to sleep. Anxiety about Andrès' marriage and about the sale of Cernes and Balsaou, which was ever uppermost in her mind and regularly kept her awake, tormented her until dawn: but now other worries were added to it. The mental distress that comes with the hours of darkness is never simple, being composed and orchestrated, like a symphony, in a pattern of interweaving motifs. Had Catherine overheard her mother's conversation with Gradère? At what precise moment had the girl taken up her post of vantage in the corridor? Mathilde tried to remember what it was she had said about her. 'Was she already there when I cried out (because that is practically what I did do) that I thought her ugly, morose, sullen . . . did she hear all that? It would be horrible if she did.' But that was not the worst. Though Mathilde had managed to disguise the distress which Gabriel's insidious words had caused her, she had lied to him. Andrès was *not* any longer in what is usually described as "a state of innocence." True, he had been for many years, and pretended to her that he was so still. But she knew well enough that he was playing a part whenever they were together. He still called her "Tamati" as in the old days when he had been unable to say "tante Mathilde." The very tone in which he spoke the word, the way he behaved like a spoiled child, were all of a piece with that baby language. She had remained "Tamati" to him . . . but there were many things in his life now that Tamati could never know.

Nothing, to be sure, can long remain a secret in small country places, where all one's neighbours' actions are matters of common knowledge; but several times a week Andrès left the house at "crack of dawn"—giving as his reason that he had tree-felling to

supervise or dealers to see,—and was often away for forty-eight hours at a time. Symphorien Desbats, for all his stinginess, was generous in the matter of petrol. It was almost as though he *liked* to think of Andrès roaming the countryside. ‘But why?’ Mathilde wondered.

There was no proof at all that Andrès was not, as he said he was, keeping an eye on the estate and visiting the farmers—with whom he was on very good terms (they were almost his only friends), or occasionally having a drink with old army pals. . . . ‘That’s all very well, but why has his appearance changed so suddenly in the last six months? I was always at him for looking so grubby and unkempt, and now he’s begun to spruce himself up.’ Not for the first time, in that room of his which Gabriel found so intolerably stuffy, had she been conscious of a pervading scent of lotions, of the smell of stale hair-oil. What he most admired in his father was an appearance of elegance of which he quite failed to realize the shoddiness. The big, strong youth was dazzled by the old and worn-out buck. . . . Well, she reflected, he was, after all, his son, his and Adila’s and how could any child of theirs be wholly innocent? What reason had she for believing that Andrès was chaste or retiring? From far back he had derived from his father an idea of “woman” which had left him bitterly critical of the young females of Liogeats. Not one of them found favour in his eyes. For a long while this contemptuous attitude had been, with Mathilde, a matter for rejoicing. ‘Time enough for all that later on’ she had thought. She knew now that they would never attract him. But that there was *some* woman in his life seemed almost certain. Who it could be she had no idea. She had always had “feelings” about him, and her feeling at this moment was that he was the victim of some obscure and overwhelming passion, though that did not alter the fact that he was planning to marry Catherine, that he looked on marriage with her as a foregone conclusion.

When Gabriel had questioned her about Catherine's and Andrès' attitude to one another, she had not known what answer to make, because it had been a rule with her never to think about it. . . . How did the boy behave when he was with Catherine? The fact was that he treated her like a sister for whom he felt no particular affection. . . . No, not even that. It would be more accurate to say that he scarcely seemed to see her, that for him she was just part of the house, a piece of furniture that he had taken over with the rest of the property. He had grown up, had been trained, in the expectation of "inheriting" her, and his intention had never shown the slightest sign of weakening. Whatever else there might be in his life, it was not of a kind to deflect him from the projected marriage.

Mathilde heard two o'clock strike. She must get some sleep. She did not wish to carry her reflections further, being well aware that her thought had merely scratched the surface. But just as she would have scouted any temptation to indulge in scrupulous self-examination, so now she deliberately refused to explore her own responsibility in this matter of her daughter. Not one of Gabriel's insidious enquiries but had long lurked in the background of her mind. She had always avoided facing the issue. She made her confession once every month (rather less often now that she had felt compelled to go to the Dean because of the gossip that was making the rounds on the subject of the Abbé Forcas). What was not matter for confession could not be a sin. Why look for trouble? Catherine would be happier with Andrès than with anybody else. She could never have found a man willing to marry her except for her money. . . . Of course, marriages between cousins . . . but it had never occurred to Mathilde that Andrès might have children. . . . Perhaps there would never be any. . . .

She awoke about eight o'clock, and dressed hurriedly. She recognized Andrès' step on the porch, and opened the window.

"Wait a moment," she called down to him, "and I'll join you."

There was not a breath of wind. The November sun was still warm. Light flashed from dew and puddles. Andrès declared that the fine weather would not last. He kept his gaze steadily on the windows of Symphorien's room, where the old man had been closeted with Gradère for more than an hour.

"I can't imagine what they've found to talk about all this long time"; said Mathilde nervously. "They've been at it for ages. They can hardly be discussing the price because that's already been agreed upon. . . . Your father must be angling for a commission. . . ."

"No, Tamati; you're being unfair to papa. Besides, it really doesn't matter. Cheer up: the question of my marriage has been settled once and for all."

"Are you positive?"

She took his arm and led him into the path that skirted the fields. She was in high spirits.

"All our land, and all the Desbats' coming to you! When I think of what sort of a man your father is, it's really more than we could ever have hoped."

"I won't have you running down papa. . . ."

They had come to a halt in the middle of the path. She studied him carefully. He was wearing a sports-coat ordered from *La Belle Jardinière*, and leggings. He was a dark-skinned young fellow, rather short and thickset. The expression of his face was open and smiling, but it had a way of turning sullen as the slightest word, so suspicious was he, so ready to believe that others were laughing at him. She noticed that he was freshly shaved, and had smarted down his naturally wavy hair. She smiled.

"Is it in honour of your father that you've smartened yourself up so? I suppose you want to compete. . . ."

"When I'm with him I look like a country lout. . . ."

Mathilde bridled:

"Of the two of you he's the one who looks like a country lout. . . ."

"But there's no resemblance between us—not the slightest. . . ."

"You little silly! You're far more truly elegant than he is. . . ."

"Poor Tamati!"

"You have the looks and the bearing of a boy of your class. There's a false air of smartness about him with his light suits. . . . He looks all wrong, somehow. . . ."

"I don't agree. Let's talk about something else. . . ."

He walked ahead of her towards the house, kicking at a pinecone and sulking. 'I oughtn't to have said that' thought Mathilde. 'After all, he is his father . . . but he knows nothing about him . . . whereas, I . . . But why should I mind if he has illusions about Gabriel?' She spoke again:

"I don't wish any ill to your father. The great thing is that you're not a bit like him. . . ."

He scowled at her:

"I'm a great deal more like him than you think!"

"No," she answered with a smile: "I'm quite easy on that score."

Words came from him in an ill-tempered mutter: "My stupidity, my ignorance, have given you a wrong idea of me. I've never got out of my rut. Consequently, you think I'm no good for anything but keeping an eye on the felling, and doing accounts with the farmer . . . just about good enough, in fact, to marry Catherine. . . ."

Mathilde stopped dead, startled into immobility. "You're *not* going to make difficulties . . . not now, just when we're in sight of the goal? . . ."

His hands were stuffed into his pockets, his shoulders hunched.

"No," he growled. "The whole business has been dragging on long enough. The sooner it's over and done with, the better. Don't worry."

She heaved a sigh of relief and took his arm. "Dear boy, there's something I want to say. . . . I realize that Catherine and you are old friends . . . all the same, you might be a little nicer to her. You don't, really, make any effort . . . after all, she *is* engaged to you. . . ."

"What on earth are you getting at? Why should Catherine and I pretend to feel what neither of us does feel? Marriage won't make the slightest difference to our lives. Things will be put on a business footing as Uncle Symphorien always agreed that they should be, that's all. The whole thing's a mere formality. . . ."

Never before had Andrès spoken so cynically, and Mathilde felt deeply shocked. It was not he, but his father who was speaking, his father, who had so strong an influence on him.

"But darling," she insisted: "you *must* think of Catherine a little. The poor child has got feelings like everybody else. I don't doubt for a moment that you'll make her an attentive and affectionate husband, but don't forget what you owe her. Marriage is a sacrament . . ."

"Oh, come off it! Catherine doesn't expect me to be anything more than a good man of business. I shall carry on with my job, only . . ."

Thoroughly disconcerted, Mathilde looked hard at him.

". . . . only, I shan't forget that for years the old man has been exploiting me, that I've worn myself out in his service, and got nothing, or next to nothing, for my pains. . . . I've a right to some sort of return, haven't I, Tamati?"

He *was* like his father. In a flash he had become the very image of him. Not for the first time she recognised the cajoling way in which Gradère, as a boy, had always masked a concentrated and ferocious greediness. . . . She was only too familiar with this particular phenomenon. A pink and white, sickly child had suddenly peeped out from the black-haired youth. This was no longer the Andrès she had known. . . .

She was perfectly well aware that what he had said had not been said at random, that every word had been premeditated, and that Gradère had been his tutor.

"Yes, things'll be on a regular footing, from now on. I shan't, any longer, have to be constantly on the spot, studying the crops and keeping the old man in good fettle. I'm counting on being able to take a trip to Paris now and again to see my father. He's quite alone, he's got nobody. He's been exploited too: it's my duty to look after him. . . ."

"But, Andrès, your uncle Symphorien can't possibly do without his daughter. . . . Catherine is indispensable to him. . . ."

"We shan't quarrel over *her*," said Andrès with a laugh.

"But if you do go to Paris, it won't be for long, will it? You hate Paris, you know you do. You can't breathe when you're away from Liogeats."

"That's what *you've* decided. You always have decided what I like and what I don't like. I've no intention of leaving Liogeats. I shall go off from time to time, but I shall come back. It'll all depend . . ."

"On what? On whom?"

He said nothing. His smile revealed strong, healthy teeth, unevenly spaced—his mother's teeth. On the face of the young man whom she had loved dearly ever since he was a child, Mathilde caught an expression that told of some vague desire now coming triumphantly into the open, though what its nature was she did not know. In a low voice, she said:

"And how about me, Andrès? What's going to happen to me?"

"Oh, Tamati," he replied teasingly: "it's no good your pretending that you haven't had full value from me up to now! Besides, I'll cook up a little grandson for you in next to no time . . . perhaps a couple . . . and I shan't quarrel over them, either. Besides," he added with a hint of malice in his voice, "you mustn't forget that you'll always have your daughter. . . ."

It wasn't like him to say that. Gradère was speaking through the lips of innocence.

The sun was already high and as hot as in late September. The cows were ambling, one by one, into the pasture, and, behind them, the farmer's boy was closing the gate all sparkling with dew. Mathilde riveted her attention on the animals. She did not want to know the nature of her feelings at that moment. She refused to see what was as plain as a pikestaff. Her whole will was concentrated on making this conversation no different from those other conversations she had had with Andrès. He was going to be a rich man. His father would get his hooks into him, would probably pervert him. . . . He would run away and see the world. It was just as simple as that.

But suddenly, as unexpected, as unintended, as a rush of blood to the mouth, a cry escaped her. It had been uttered even before she knew what she was saying.

"You don't love me! You never have loved me!"

He stared at her in amazement. She, herself, seemed shocked by her outburst. When next she spoke, she tried to be calmer, more light-hearted, but her voice was still trembling:

"What more could I have done for you if you had been my own son?"

"What more could you have done, Tamati? Do you really want me to answer that question? Well, in the first place, you could have thought about my future. You could have sent me away from this house where I was growing up to be just a country bumpkin. You could have decided that what the village schoolmaster could teach me wasn't enough. You could have sent me to a boarding-school in Bordeaux. . . . What a hope! You were bored, living here with the old man. Your daughter Catherine . . . but we won't talk about her. . . . I was your distraction, your delight. Later on, you agreed that your husband should turn me into a sort of unpaid bailiff. Provided I stayed on perman-

ently at Liogeats you didn't bother. I had to have some amusement, so you thought of football, and coughed up a playing-field. Oh, I know I'm the star performer of the village, and, naturally, if I hadn't had you . . . but don't try to make me believe that you've always treated me like a son . . . that's a bit too much!"

It was all true. Everything he was saying was true. Its truth came to her in a blinding flash. But who had opened his eyes? After all, she did know him through and through. This vague feeling that he had been sacrificed must have been implanted in his mind by somebody. Even the language he had used wasn't his own. . . . Could it be that his father had prompted him? Then, suddenly she realized. 'It's some woman who has told him of all that he has missed. . . .'

Though she knew that what he had said was true, she made an effort to justify herself:

"You're being unfair, dear. I *did* try to make you work but you never took easily to books. You used to say that you didn't need all that amount of learning to fit you for what you would have to do when you were a man. . . . The only things you liked were football, shooting and riding."

"All young people talk like that, but most parents don't take it seriously. I should have learned to like reading. I'm no stupider than most young men of my age. . . . Merely because I organised a local football team. . . . It was you who convinced me in the long run that I was brainless. Don't think I don't know my limitations. I'm no high-flyer, still . . ."

It never occurred to him that she had heard the last few words of the sentence, because he had spoken them as though to himself . . . "still, I've got the gift of charming people. . . ." But she had guessed his meaning.

She half turned her head away. He saw that she was crying, and tried to take her in his arms, because, really, he was very fond of her. Very quietly she freed herself.

"Please leave me alone. Go and see whether your father is still with uncle Symphorien. Call me when they come out."

She watched him walk away, then looked around with pensive gaze. Scarcely anything had changed since the days of her childhood. The pines seemed to be less thickly planted, for many of them had died. The plantations had grown larger. But the smell of mist, the muted sounds of the late autumn morning belonged to as far back as she could remember. She had lost all sense of the passage of time. She felt as though she were a little girl again, running, out of breath, among the trees with Gabriel in pursuit, and her sunbonnet, fastened by an elastic round her neck, flapping up and down upon her shoulders in the wind of her scurrying course . . . Gabriel. . . . She had tried, as she grew up, to think as little as possible about the past; never to dream or speak of it, but to live in the present, worrying only about what she could see and touch. Only the presence of the boy Andrès had made it possible for her to live up to that resolution. He was right. She *had* made use of him: *had* lived on his life. He had been to her as a pet dog, he, the son of the man she had once loved. She could never have faced life at Liogeats had she had no companions but Symphorien Desbats and Catherine. That was why she had never so much as considered sending him away to school. It was true. She had not watched over his education, had never tried to, but had done everything in her power to strengthen his passion for the land. So strong, she had felt, would be the feel of the land in his blood, that he would never want to leave Liogeats. . . .

The sound of Andrès feet upon the stone steps reached her ears distinctly. She looked at the trees about her, and saw them as dead things. The hedges, the gate, the fields beyond, were to her as objects in a mirage, unreal as memories. "Lay not up for yourselves treasures . . ." What a poignant meaning those simple words can take on for certain people at certain times. The

clutching fingers relax their hold upon the branch. One no longer clings to anything.

The thought held her there motionless. For twenty years she had been living, without knowing it, in despair. Despair may become an unconscious state of mind. She leaned against an oak, listening, without taking it in, to the sound made by a passing waggon. For a very long time she did not move.

VI

ANDRÈS was calling to her from the steps. He was waving a paper, and she realized that the business was settled. It could only be at Catherine's expense. Once again she had to struggle with a vague feeling of remorse. . . . Still, after all, the girl was not alone. Her father loved her as much as it was possible for him to love anybody (which was not saying a great deal). He had probably seen to it that she should not be sacrificed.

A remnant of curiosity made her hurry. Andrès ran towards her.

"It's all settled," he called out. "I've signed the deed of sale. It's in the form of a gentleman's agreement. Now we needn't think of anything but the marriage. Here's the text of the contract. It seems perfectly fair to me. All we want now is your approval."

He was breathing hard, and his face was flushed. He looked excited and happy. Mathilde glanced over the paper. The contract provided for a monthly payment to Catherine of ten thousand francs. Andrès was to have a percentage of the resin-yield, and of all prices fetched by the sale of timber. It was further stipulated that any expenses the young couple might have in setting up house should be defrayed, and that there should be no question

of their paying an annuity. Andrès was to contribute all the property that remained to him to the common fund—one half of the house and garden (which had been jointly held since Adila's death).

"Nunky insists on opening a bottle of Champagne in honour of our betrothal. But his asthma's come on again badly."

Even before they had opened the door they could hear the wheezing of the sick man's breathing, and could catch the smell of eucalyptus. His was the smallest room in the house, and the air in it was always thick with the steam of fumigations. The invalid was sitting huddled in an armchair. He fixed a pair of glittering eyes on Mathilde and Andrès.

"All this emotion has brought on one of my crises"—he gasped.

He was wearing a woollen waistcoat over his nightshirt. An eiderdown was tucked about his knees. It was popularly said that Catherine was the image of her father, though, truth to tell, all that Symphorien Desbats had in common with her was the purely animal expression of her face. Like her, however, he was small of stature and dark of skin. Everything about him was angular—his nose, the shape of his skull, his elbows and his bony shoulders. He was panting.

"You've read over the agreement, Mathilde? The sale's all fixed, and we've signed. Cernes and Balisaou are to come to me. . . . Balisaou and Cernes. . . . But I've shelled out for 'em you know. The boy had to have ready cash for the engagement ring and a few odds and ends . . . not that they'll have much in the way of expense. . . . Gercinthe has gone down to the cellar . . . to fetch the bottle of Roederer I've been keeping . . . as I've often told you . . . for Catherine's engagement. . . ."

Gradère was on his feet. He looked rather flushed, and his eyes were fixed on the sick man. He made a sign to Andrès and whispered something in his ear. Gercinthe came in, carrying a bottle

of Champagne and some glasses on a tray. Suddenly, Gabriel spoke:

"We're all here except the heroine of the occasion."

Symphorien glanced round him:

"That's a fact; 'pon my word. . . . Gercinthe, go and fetch Catherine . . . she can't be far away."

A fit of coughing shook him. His eyes never left the communicating door.

"Ah, there you are, m'dear . . . you were the only thing we'd forgotten."

The assumed look of surprise with which Catherine asked what all the excitement was about, and then her expression of terror, her cry—"I'm not engaged to anybody!"—were on the level of third-rate melodrama. Symphorien, on the other hand, was playing his part to perfection. He turned to Andrès with a look of bewilderment.

"But I thought you two had everything fixed up between you, my boy. You gave me your word that it was so. . . . Catherine, why have you left me in the dark like this?"

Andrès had gone white and his lips were trembling. He looked in turn at his father, at Catherine, at Mathilde. Once again the dry, indifferent tones of the young girl broke the silence:

"You never asked me what *I* thought. I am engaged to nobody. I will never consent to marry Andrès."

Old Desbats was no longer bothering to keep up the farce. In spite of the asthma that was torturing him, his expression was one of profound satisfaction, with a hint in it of fear.

"My darling girl, no one's going to put pressure on you. . . . You're perfectly free, and . . ."

Gabriel broke in on him:

"Oh, lay off . . . this play-acting's gone on long enough!"

"My dear fellow, I don't know what you mean by play-acting. . . . No one could be more surprised, more shocked than I am . . .

I'd been building on this . . . I'm still hopeful that she'll think again"—and then, as Catherine interrupted the flow with "I've done all the thinking necessary"—"in any case"—the next words came tumbling from his lips—"in any case, I shall stand by everything I've promised Andrès. . . ."

The young man who, so far, had said nothing, and seemed stunned, now stammered out:

"You don't think, do you, that I shall stay here a day longer? . . . I've slaved and . . ."

His father interrupted him:

"Don't talk nonsense, my boy. This house is yours, and you'll remain in it. You've been robbed, you've been plundered . . . but the chateau is partly yours. This is your home, and, since you've been so kind as to offer me hospitality, I shall stay too, for as long as may be necessary."

He kept his blue eyes fixed on the invalid, who was now hanging his head, but still watching him slyly.

"Necessary for what?"

Gradère replied without any show of emotion:

"For making you cough up. . . ."

"Look here, my good fellow . . . if it comes to coughing up . . . you've got a pretty good cheek, I must say . . . I hope you're not going to force me to dot my i's. . . . I'm perfectly ready to tear up the deed of sale on condition that Andrès pays me back. . . . But perhaps you've already disposed of your son's money?"

Only Gradère and Andrès heard these last words. The young man took his father's hand. The latter had gone white and now replied with dry finality:

"What's been signed has been signed."

There was a silence, which was broken by Mathilde saying in a colourless voice:

"Ever since this engagement was first mooted, I, too, my girl, thought that you and Andrès were in agreement. There was a

time when you used to speak of it yourself. But I shall put no pressure on you. . . ."

The girl replied insolently that her mother had good reason not to give herself that trouble. Mathilde shrugged her shoulders, and, without saying another word, left the room, followed by Gabriel and Andrès.

For a moment the sick man and Catherine sat listening. He asked her to go and see whether the others were still lurking in the passage. She half opened the door—no, they had disappeared.

"I hope, my child, that you see now the wisdom of what I told you. It never does any good to irritate people. I suppose you wanted to see the look on their faces. Well, you've had your little bit of fun . . . and so have I, I don't deny it . . . but now . . . you heard what Gradère said? . . . We shall never be rid of him."

"What of it?" asked Catherine, arranging the sick man's pillows. He groaned:

"Don't you realize there's nothing he would stick at?"

"How can he hurt us?" the young girl exclaimed loudly.

"Speak lower!" he whispered: "you don't know that man. I found out a good deal about him, and I've not told you half of it. You're not old enough, you wouldn't understand. . . ."

He shuddered. A tender smile lit up Catherine's unattractive face. She laid a hand on her father's forehead.

"He may be a bad lot, but he can't eat us! . . . So far as I can see it's *we* who have the whip-hand of *him*"—there was a note of savage joy in her voice.

"I'm ill, Catherine, though not so near to dying as they think—and hope. . . . But I shall never shake off this asthma, though it may go on for years, of course. Clairac told me so, only yesterday. . . . But that doesn't alter the fact that I am utterly defenceless. . . ."

He broke off, struggling for breath:

"Take care, child. I don't know what they're plotting. . . . Keep your eyes skinned so long as *he's* here. Sooner or later he'll go. There's someone in Paris who'll make him go back. . . . He's no idea that I've been corresponding with that precious Aline of his. Luckily, she's got a hold over him. All the same, I shall breathe a good deal easier when he's gone."

"Did you notice mamma?"—asked Catherine suddenly. "She's tough, all right: she never batted an eyelid. . . . I was watching her the whole time. . . ."

He hadn't, he said, been able to see her, because she had kept behind his chair.

"I'm not sure," said the girl, "that she isn't really rather pleased at my refusing to have anything to do with *Andrès*. . . ."

She sat staring in front of her.

"It's not your mother you need to worry about . . . it's that ruffian. . . . I don't like it when he speaks softly. Keep an eye on everything, my girl . . . and especially on the kitchen. . . . Beware of fire, and don't go out after dark. . . ."

A fit of coughing stopped him:

"And you'd better have a look at *Andrès'* accounts. His father was a tenant farmer, and, if it comes to the point, he'll always back his people against me. They say he loves the land, but it's an odd sort of love that makes a man stand in with those who eat us out of hearth and home! Besides, you've only got to see how he acquiesces in his father's robbing of us. . . . Little by little he's let all the rents fall into arrears. . . . He's as weak as water. . . . A fine state of affairs it'd have been if he'd come to be master here. Watch him well, that's all I've got to say. . . ."

"Don't worry: I'll watch the lot of them."

VII

"HAS Andrès calmed down?"

"Yes, he's lying on his bed, and his eyes are shut. I've put a damp towel on his forehead."

Scarcely an hour had passed since Desbats had laid his cards on the table. Very quietly Mathilde closed the door of the room which she always thought of as "Adila's," though Gabriel was now occupying it.

"I always knew that Andrès had a temper," she said. "Since he's been grown up there have been times when I've seen him in such a blind fury that he carried on like a madman. But I've never known him behave as he did just now. Obviously, he's taken it hard. . . ."

She sat down on the bed. Gradère was smoking, his hands in his pockets, his lips a hard line.

"What really surprises me," went on Mathilde, "is that he seems so *unhappy* about it all. Anger's one thing, but he's genuinely suffering. I do believe he loves the place as he might love a person. To look at him now, one would almost suppose he'd lost someone he was fond of."

"You talk more truly than you realize."

She threw him a questioning look.

"And you're always saying you know him. My poor Mathilde, I can see a great deal further than you, and I've been here only since yesterday evening. . . ."

His words hurt her. It was not so much that they hinted at some frightening secret in the part of Andrès' life that was hidden from her, as that they proved to what extent this man had the boy's confidence. That very morning, while she lay asleep, he had told his father things that she had never known. With an air of detachment, she said:

"Oh, there's quite a lot I suspect!"

She was lying. She had not the slightest idea what he meant. He could see that she was suffering, and the knowledge that that was so made him suffer in his turn, though not from sympathy. In this very room that had once been Adila's, twenty years ago, he had let her peep behind his mask. She had discovered the sort of man he really was. He remembered the dull sound that her body had made as it struck the floor when she had fainted in the passage outside the door. And now it was for Andrès that she was in torment. Not that he was jealous of Andrès. But he would have liked to share with Mathilde the bitter memory of what once had been. . . And now, everything, even bitterness, was dead in her. It was the knowledge of this emptiness that had got on his nerves, that had made him cruel to her. He watched her suffer, yielding to the curiosity which the sufferings of others always roused in him, so that he longed to fan the flames. He pretended to have been taken in, he said:

"Naturally, you're far too sensitive not to have noticed that there is some woman in Andrès' life."

"I knew it! . . ."

Her wide-open eyes were on Gabriel's lips.

"Then it will be no surprise to you when I say that none of us matter a rap to him. He's not my son for nothing! It's from me he's inherited that invincible determination to get what he wants, no matter at what cost. . . . He's just a bundle of instincts, like his mother was. . . ."

She broke in on him:

"How dare you speak of Adila like that! How dare you mention her name!"

This defence of Adila was the pretext she needed in order to give free rein to her jealousy and her torment. But Gradère would not let the subject drop:

"You can't alter facts. Andrès is a child of love."

"No," she protested: "not of love, but of hate, because you hated Adila, just as she hated the fact that she had been victimized by you, enslaved and possessed by evil. Poor Andrès!—a child of love, you say. You should say, rather, a child of hatred and remorse. . . ."

"Oh, come now, Mathilde! I always thought big words were suspect in Liogeats. I find it difficult to recognise myself from your description, I, the 'aimless chatterer.' . . ."

Had she heard him? She was sitting very erect, her hands crossed on her dark dress that was devoid of all adornment. What nobility there was in her forehead, in the line of brow and nose! But it was in the large mouth with its bloodless lips, in the ruined glory of her neck, that all her ardour and her torment showed.

For a while she was silent, then, at last, she spoke:

"I know nothing of the woman Andrès loves—not even who she is. There is no one at Liogeats. . . ."

"She's not a native of Liogeats: she was staying for a few weeks at the presbytery. . . ."

"You can't mean that creature! . . ."

"He met her by chance one Thursday, in the train, on his way back from a Rugby match at Saint-Clair. It was she who made the running. All through the autumn they used to meet in lonely paddocks and empty farm-houses. Now she's living over at Lugdunos, in that new hotel on the Place Malbec."

He could not take his eyes from her. He was amazed at her immobility (only a muscle at the corner of her lips twitched just perceptibly), at the calm way in which she put her next question:

"What possible connexion can there be between this adventure of Andrès—which really has nothing to do with me—and his broken engagement?"

"Tota Revaux (that's her name) has recently left for Paris. It's common knowledge that she was at Lugdunos, and though her brother was entirely ignorant of her movements, gossip has

it that it was he who arranged it all, that they're not even related. . . . You know better than I do the horrible tittle-tattle that goes on in Liogeats. . . . She adores her brother, it seems, and that's why she has gone away, in spite of Andrès. She was afraid her staying on here might harm the Abbé. The boy accepted her decision because it was his intention, once the marriage was an accomplished fact, or perhaps even before, to join her in Paris . . . to set her up there. . . . But now all that's been blown sky-high. . . . I don't, personally, think that the woman's feeling for him is altogether disinterested, though he swears it is. . . ."

Here, Mathilde interrupted him with the information that Andrès had recently received a fat cheque in connexion with the sale of Cernes and Balisaou. . . . Gradère averted his gaze but said nothing. She went close to him.

"You did take that money from him, didn't you?—don't deny it."

He protested, but without any very great show of vehemence:

"Certainly not . . . he's merely-invested it. . . . I'm giving him five per cent. on what he can't place elsewhere. I offered him every penny I had left, but he refused, because it wouldn't have been of any use to him. . . . Besides, I've something better to offer . . . when he's in a fit state to listen. He's already promised me not to clear out until we've won our little game."

Mathilde trembled. She hated this soft voice of his: it filled her with a sense of horror that defied all analysis. She touched his shoulder, and then quickly withdrew her hand.

"It would be a great deal better if you were to clear out, too, Gabriel":—she spoke with sudden warmth, and on a note of supplication. "Go, leave me. Catch the three o'clock train. . . ."

"My dear girl, I've got a lot of things to see to here."

She was insistent:

"You can only do harm. Whatever happens, it's no use your counting on me."

She was close to the door. He was still standing by the window, with his back to the light. She could see nothing but the outline of his face.

"You know, my dear, I can be very useful to you. You'll live to thank me . . . just see if you don't. . . ."

"No!" she protested: "no!"

"It would be wiser to find out what's in my mind before you say no. Have you any idea what it can be?"

She raised a finger to her lips and was listening intently:

"I hear the car," she said.

"He's off to see *her*. Perhaps it's to be their last meeting. . . ."

A cry escaped Mathilde:

"If only she doesn't take him with her!"

Gradère advanced towards her. She made no move, but stood there with her hand upon the latch. He took her by the shoulders.

"Don't worry: he'll obey me. . . . I, too"—he went on with a false air of jollity—"am fond of the boy. . . . D'you want me to abandon him in the middle of a crisis?"

In a low, harsh voice, he added:

"He's going to be master here, and that before many weeks are out. . . . You can take my word for it!"

Still she said nothing, and he murmured, pressing her slightly to him (she could smell his breath)—

"He is going to be master, because you are going to be mistress. . . ."

She wrenched herself free:

"I count for nothing here, as you very well know. Desbats shares the throne with nobody."

"Of course, of course . . . but though asthma may not seem a very serious thing, my dear, it does in the long run put a considerable strain on the heart."

"He'll live to bury the lot of us: that's what Clairac says."

"I've a good deal more confidence in my diagnosis than in Clairac's."

He laughed. Such horror came over her at the sound that she felt strong enough to break the spell and leave the room. She went downstairs, crossed the hall, took a cape, and plunged into the mist which the midday sun was gilding but could not penetrate. The Angelus was sounding. Young Lassus must be ringing it. Ear-splitting sirens were screaming of freedom to the factory workers. She felt a lightness as of deliverance. Her sense of suffering had passed. The world was all a glow of light. Life had a taste of sweetness on her lips, a scent in her nostrils that she had long forgotten. . . . She was relying on she knew not what. She would wait for the morrow. The man she had just left had inoculated her with hope.

VIII

ON the evening of that same day, the shutters remained open even though darkness had fallen. A street lamp on the Place Malbec at Lugdunos threw its light upon the bed where Tota lay stretched at full length, as under a shroud, smoking. She was watching Andrès gesturing. Standing there, at the moment of departure, he showed as no more than an overgrown and ill-dressed boy, a rugby-player with a thatch of curly hair on a rather brutish-looking head. He, meanwhile, had eyes only for the movements of her lovely arm in the half-light, as she stretched it to the ash-tray, or carried the cigarette to her lips.

"No," she said firmly: "you're not to use my brush!"

He obeyed at once, for he felt towards all her precious objects of ivory, her crystal bottles with their golden stoppers, a species of reverence. Looking at the low forehead with its crown of curls, she was thinking: 'I should have got most awfully bored. . . .'

But what, then, was she to do—trot back to the fold, as Alain wanted; go and live at La Benaugue—the house where her mother had died a year ago—and eke out an impoverished existence (the cellars were filled with wine—three years' gathering—still unsold: the vineyards were let to an unscrupulous wretch who cut back the plants so unmercifully that soon they'd be no good at all) . . . death would be better than that! But how could she live in Paris on an income of twelve thousand francs? . . . She might, of course, pick up somebody . . . but, for Alain's sake, she did not want to go gay, to sink altogether into the mire. The only other possibility would be to follow Alain's other suggestion, and make it up with her husband—that drug-addict, that semi-lunatic, who beat her . . . that poor fish who had never amounted to anything as a writer, or as anything else, if it came to that. . . . No, never! What she'd really like would be for Andrès to pay her occasional visits in Paris, and help her to make ends meet. . . . After all, she did "like" him. . . . She'd better get busy and make up his mind for him. . . .

"I've got to think seriously about going back . . . for my brother's sake. I bring him nothing but trouble. . . ."

"Who are you going back to? . . . Come on, out with it!" The collar of his shirt was open. She could see the full column of his powerful neck, the dark chin jutting slightly forward.

"There's no one, I tell you . . . and until I'm driven by sheer necessity there won't be anybody. . . . What's to stop you from going with me? Oh, I know all about your engagement . . . but you can easily cook up some story. . . ."

He just perceptibly leaned towards her. A hand touched his lips. He collapsed into a chair like a felled tree.

"Are you crazy?"

He scrambled to his feet. She could hear the sound of his breathing.

"Totà, I *can't* go with you. . . ."

No, it was utterly impossible. He remembered the instructions which, no longer ago than that very morning, his father had conveyed in a low voice as they had walked up and down the corridor after their interview with old Desbats: "Stay here: hang on for a few weeks and you'll be master. Then you can have this woman you say you can't live without. It entirely depends on you whether or not you lose her for ever. . . ."

Even at the height of the crisis which, a few moments later, had flung him sobbing and screaming onto his bed, those words had remained vivid in his mind, until, gradually, the thought of them had helped to calm him. Certain promises made by his father had about them an aura of mysterious solemnity. Impossible to resist the mere force of that affirmation. No, Andrès could not go with Tota. At all costs he must make her put off her own departure. He sat down again on the bed.

"Wait just a few more days. You promised you would, only an hour ago."

She looked at him with a secret feeling of disgust. She found him pleasing only in the dark, for then he became a faceless animal, incapable of exacerbating her by looking loutish and low . . . a decapitated body in the dusk.

"The mere fact that I can't make up my mind to go ought to convince you that there is nobody . . . I'm free to choose whether to go or stay. . . . There's no one waiting for me and if it weren't for Alain . . ."

Again Andrès said: "Then you're not in love with anybody?"

"The only person I love is in another life."

"Dead?"

"Worse than dead . . . a prisoner."

Like a child who takes everything literally, Andrès asked:

"D'you mean he's in prison?"

She sighed:

"If he were in prison I could write to him. I should know that

he was thinking of me as I was thinking of him. But to say that the walls of his presbytery, that the folds of his soutane, shut him away and isolate him, is less than half the truth. . . . We are infinitely distant from one another. . . .”

“Oh, I get it! You’re speaking of your brother!” He broke into a loud, happy laugh, and put his left arm about the young woman’s shoulders.

“You gave me an awful fright, you know!”

The white stillness of her face drew him like a magnet. Slowly he approached his own. A car drove across the Place Malbec. Dogs barked. There was the sound of a horse moving at a walk. The trap stopped at the door. They could hear somebody talking patois in the dark. Not yet did Tota feel herself far enough away from her brother. Once again she would plunge into the murk which gave her the sense of being out of his reach—hidden from everything that a man like Alain could do to act upon a human creature by enveloping her in a vast network of prayer and suffering. But Andrès said he must go home. It was essential that his father should not think that he had taken to his heels. Why, she asked, should his family be more suspicious this evening than at other times? He answered evasively. On a note of urgency he said:

“You won’t go away, will you?”

She stroked his hand without replying.

“Perhaps,” she said at length, “it’ll be enough if I move a bit further off. . . . I might settle down in Bordeaux . . . but you’ll have to help me . . . I’m far from rich. . . .”

He seemed put out. Just a little peasant, thought Tota, with his mind on his money-bags. But he was remembering his father’s promise: “Hang on for a few weeks, and the game’s yours. . . .” He insisted on her staying at Lugdunos. She did not absolutely refuse. Once more she seemed to belong to him, to be submissive to his will.

In vain he said again—“I’m going; I really must go. . . .” He

stood there, undecided, by the edge of the bed, and, because she was lying down, he looked to her enormous, though he was far from being anything of the sort. Once more she raised an arm that appeared to have no connexion with her body, to be a poised reptile, her hand its head. She laid the palm against the boy's lips, and did not cry out when he gently bit her. A silence hung over the little hotel. The sound of chopping from the kitchen scarcely broke it.

"It really is good-bye this time," he said.

Once more their faces drew together in the darkness. She listened as his footsteps died away. She was in the habit of playing a game with herself which consisted in trying to keep the sound of them, and the roar of the car, within her hearing until the last possible moment. She could tell from the way his horn sounded near or far whether he had turned the corner by the cemetery or had gone onto the Saint-Clair road. . . . This evening, therefore, she could not fail to catch his rather heavy tread muffled by the carpet of the corridor. . . . Suddenly, she heard the dull sound of a fall, of a body crashing to the ground, of Andrès' voice shouting an oath, of a gurgle of laughter.

Tora leaped from her bed, groped for her dressing-gown, and went out into the shadowed passage which was lit only by the glow coming from the staircase well. A huddle of bodies was struggling on the landing. Some joke must be going on: somebody was being held down by two guffawing youths who had flung a sheet over him.

The young woman was wearing scarcely any clothes, and dared not move forward into the light. The heavy laughter reassured her. But the man struggling on the floor fought free of the shroud in which he had been enveloped. She saw Andrès' face emerge, bleeding and contorted with anger. The two youths who had held him pinned to the carpet looked utterly bewildered.

"Good Lord! Monsieur Andrès!"

Spattered with blood, he growled out: "Mouleyre? Pardieu? you swine! You couple of louts!"

By this time Tota had run to him. Kneeling by his side, she raised his head. The damage was not great. He was bleeding from the nose, and his upper lip was slightly swollen.

"Don't stand there," she commanded in a low voice: "help me to get him into my room."

They were thoroughly upset. Andrès was one of themselves: he was popular: he never put on side, was a dam' good footballer, and the best "forward" for miles round. But for him the Liogeats team would not have existed.

Fortunately, the hotel was almost empty at that time of the year. The rooms on this floor were unoccupied. Mouleyre mumbled in his atrocious accent:

"He'll be all right. . . . We didn't know it was him. . . . We were after playing a trick on the curé . . . just a bit of a joke!"

Andrès had been lying full length on the bed. Now he sat up, and said:

"Nothing wrong with me." The youths kept on saying: "We didn't know . . . really we didn't." He shouted to them to clear out:

"And don't get talking. If you do I shall go to the police."

Mouleyre offered to stay behind in order to drive the car in case Monsieur Andrès was feeling tired. Pardieu could get himself home in the van. Of course they wouldn't breathe a word. But Andrès was still in a bad temper. "Get out, both of you!" he said.

Tota, who had not uttered a word while she was looking after Andrès, spoke at last. Without looking at the young men, she said:

"At least you can bear witness that the curé . . ." They gave her a sly look. It was Pardieu who answered, though he waited until he was in the corridor before doing so:

"Bear witness to what? What does it prove? It proves . . ."

He raised two thick fingers, one on each side of the *béret* that was drawn tightly over his narrow head.

Andrès tried to fling himself at them, but Tota restrained him.

"Let me get at them!"

They waited until the sound of the van had died away. This time it was the young man who lay on the bed, Tota who hurriedly dressed herself. The electric light filled the room with a harsh radiance.

"Why are you putting on your clothes? Aren't you coming back to bed?"—he spoke as though he were begging a favour.

She said nothing, but opened the wardrobe and pulled out a mass of dresses and underclothing.

Andrès sat up.

"Are you mad? There's no train at this hour."

She said that she would take the morning one—at five-forty. She would lie down on the bed fully dressed until it was time to start. When he asked her where she was going, the only answer he could get was "As far as possible from here. . . ." But she would write, she said, as soon as she had found somewhere, so that he might join her. He felt that she would have promised anything in order to get rid of him. His every supplication dropped dead against the blank wall of her silence. It was as though she was no longer there.

IX

"I THINK I hear the car."

Gradère went to the door, opened it and listened. The light of the moon was softened by the mist. The world was silent save for the gurgling of the Balion swollen by recent rains. Mathilde had not left the chair in which she was sitting by the fire. Had it been Andrès, she would have known it beyond all possibility of doubt. She murmured: "We shall never see him again." . . . Gradère shrugged:

"He's been delayed. . . . Put yourself in his shoes. . . . But he's not a nit-wit."

Mathilde got up suddenly:

"This time it is Andrès!"

Gabriel remarked that he could hear nothing. But already the sound of a car, emerging into life from the heart of silence, was coming closer.

"I can hear him changing down. He's just turned into the avenue."

Andrès came into the room and took off his shabby old goat-skin coat. He seemed not at all surprised to find them standing there at midnight.

"Darling!" exclaimed Mathilde: "you've hurt yourself! Your lip's all swollen, and what's that lump on your forehead?"

He explained that he had banged his face in the garage. It was nothing, he said. He crossed to the fire without answering their questions, merely remarking that he was hungry. Mathilde had had some soup kept hot, and now busied herself with laying the table. He sat down and started to eat noisily, as though he were at an inn. Gabriel, at some little distance from the table, went on smoking. Never once did he take his eyes from his son's face.

Mathilde, on the contrary, saw to his requirements but did not look at him. It came to her that she felt no wish to kiss him. The sight of him filled her with a sense of horror.

"And now, dear, it's time you were in bed."

He emptied his glass of wine at a gulp, and drew his chair to the fire. He was slightly flushed: there was a viscous look about his eyes, an ugly expression in the line of his lips. His injuries gave him the appearance of a naughty boy who had been in a fight.

"I'm not sleepy," he said: "besides, there's no time to lose. We've got a lot to discuss—unless, of course, you're tired. . . ."

"Speaking for myself," broke in Gabriel, "I don't know the meaning of the word sleep—never have, since I started turning night into day. . . . *You'd better go to bed, though, Mathilde: you're half asleep already.*"

She began to protest, but he gave her a look, the meaning of which clearly was—"leave us alone."

She did not want to do any such thing, having no idea what this man was going to say to Andrès, but feeling convinced that the boy would need someone to stand by him. At the same time, she knew herself to be incapable of resisting Gradère's wishes. She was, as it were, in a plot with him. Everything would come out all right . . . though the cost might be high. Still, what had she got to fear?—nothing. All the same, she hesitated about leaving the room, and made no further move until Gabriel pushed her gently towards the door.

"Impossible to say anything with you here"—he murmured.

"What about?"

"You know perfectly well what I'm going to say."

She made a gesture to the effect that she did not know what he meant. He shrugged, and nodded his head in the direction of Andrès, who was sitting with his back towards them, his legs stretched out to the blaze.

Her shake of the head was barely perceptible. He opened the

door and stood back to let her pass. She made one last effort to turn back.

"No, Gabriel," she brought out in a firm voice, "I *don't* understand."

He walked over to his son who had covered his face with his two roughened hands—"to keep the heat of the fire off"—Gabriel thought at first. But, a moment later, he realized that the boy was crying.

"Don't mind me," he said: "we can have our talk later."

Andrès blew his nose noisily. He was shaken by sobs, as in the old days after one of his childish fits of temper. Bergère laid her muzzle on his knee and gazed up at him. 'Better let him quieten down,' thought Gabriel. He would wait until the boy was in a fit state to listen. There was no hurry: they had the night before them. Though he did not yet know how he was to begin, he had a strong feeling that he would carry the day, convinced, as he was, that he was being directed and supported by something outside himself.

"Well?" he said, taking Andrès' hand and pressing it.

"She's gone."

"All the better. Yes, I mean that: all the better. She's leaving us a free field in which to get things here straightened out."

"I don't know where she is."

"In Paris, old man. That kind of bird always goes to roost in Paris. . . . Don't worry, we'll get her back for you. I don't mind betting there'll be a letter before the week's out. . . ."

"She did promise she'd write. . . ."

"Why those tears, then?"

The boy smiled. He suddenly felt full of hope again, and asked his father what news there was at the big house. Gradère drew up his chair, threw a log on the fire, and watched the flames as they leaped from twig to twig.

"Nothing, for the moment. We've got to think about the

future, and a pretty near future at that. It's no good saying the old man's pretty far gone, that his heart won't hold out much longer. . . ."

"Is *that* what you're counting on? . . ." said Andrès, breaking in. There was a note of disappointment in his voice. "And what about afterwards? D'you really think Catherine's likely to change her mind? I know her too well to believe that. . . . Besides, I wouldn't go through with it, not now . . . not for anything in the world."

He got up and started to move aimlessly about the room, saying over and over again, complainingly:

"If that's all you've got to suggest . . ."

"It's not a question of Catherine," said Gradère. "Oh, I don't deny that we might have tried it on when circumstances seemed favourable . . . but I realize that you're not prepared to overlook her attitude . . . especially since you can look forward to something a great deal better. . . ." Then (in a lower voice) "By the terms of their marriage settlement—Tamati's and the old man's, I mean—all property subsequently acquired was to be held jointly. That means that, as a widow, she'll have the whole of her share of the Du Buch property, *plus* half of everything her husband got his hands on after they became man and wife—everything, in short, that he bought back off me."

Andrès was listening with his mouth half open and a frown on his forehead:

"A precious lot of good that does to me!" he muttered.

Gradère went on talking. His voice sounded quite colourless, as though he were discussing some purely academic point:

"When it's a question of saving a patrimony, families will often agree to the oddest kind of pairings. . . . After all, there's scarcely any bond of relationship between Tamati and you: she was only your mother's cousin. . . . Naturally, it would have to be a marriage in name only—that goes without saying . . . then, once the

business part of the affair was settled, things between you would be just as they are now. . . ."

"You must be raving, papa!"

Andrès bent down and shook his father's shoulder.

"You're completely crazy!"

"But why, if the thing remains just simply a matter of form? I realize, of course, that you couldn't marry anyone else during Tamati's lifetime . . . but you needn't make yourself miserable over that . . . and when, sooner or later you're free . . ."

"Well, but look here: in the first place, can you really see her lending herself to a mockery of that sort . . . matter of form or no matter of form? . . . I know her. She looks on me as her son. She'd think such an idea monstrous!"

Gradère shook his head: "You're quite wrong," he said with a knowing laugh: "take my word for it, she'll agree to everything. We've got plenty of time to prepare the ground. . . ."

"And what are the people of Liogeats going to say? Can't you just see their faces?"

Gabriel remained unperturbed.

"The marriage," he went on, "can take place privately, though that may be a bit difficult with Catherine in the house. We shall have to give a little more thought to that side of it. As a matter of fact, where money's concerned, there's not much that folk hereabouts aren't prepared to swallow."

"But look here, papa; what does all this amount to? Uncle Symphorien's perfectly hale and hearty. . . ."

"Hearty, perhaps . . . hale? . . . I'm not so sure."

"Anyhow, he may hang on for years."

"You're dreaming, my good idiot!"

"Well, for a good long time, then . . . and I can't wait. . . . I refuse to go on living in this state of uncertainty!"

Andrès resumed his prowling. His father, who was following him with his eyes, said suddenly:

"You won't be in a state of uncertainty for long—I guarantee that."

Andrès stopped dead and stared at the man who had just spoken. The voice was the voice of a stranger. Gradère, seated on a low chair, his elbows on his knees, kept his face averted. All that Andrès could see of him was the almost slender back of a neck, and a pair of shoulders that looked thin beneath the heavy English tweed. He could hear the man's quickened breathing.

He took a few steps and opened the door giving on to the garden. The night was clean and cold. The gurgling of the Balion made one with the sighing of the faint breeze. He passed his hand over his forehead and turned back to face his father.

"D'you mean to say you can see into the future?" he said with a laugh: "that you know what's going to happen?"

He had laughed in order to break the spell that was on him, to get himself back into the atmosphere of everyday.

The other, still leaning forward to the fire, replied:

"The future is what we choose to make it." At these words he raised his eyes to the young man, and was struck by the expression of anxiety and unease upon his face.

"Why are you looking at me like that, Andrès? What have I said that's so extraordinary?"

"Nothing at all. . . ."

The boy shook his head as though to chase away an absurd and hateful thought. Suddenly, the memory of Tota came back to him. For two or three minutes she had been absent from his mind, but now the thought of her came flooding in again, or rather, he was conscious of her as of a ball of fire deep in his being, mingled with all that was most himself. . . .

Gradère, having said what he had to say, fell silent. There was nothing to do now except to wait.

The latch of the door leading to the stairs moved softly, and Mathilde came in. She had put on her purple dressing-gown and

plaited her hair for the night. They had not heard her because her bare feet were thrust into a pair of bedroom slippers.

"I came down again," she said, "because I felt uneasy. Do you know what time it is?"

Andrès stared at her for the space of a few seconds only. There was an extraordinary intensity in his gaze. She said:

"What have you been talking about?"

"Hanged if I know... what *have* we been talking about, Andrès?"

The young man made a vague gesture and hurried from the room. Mathilde and Gradère followed him.

They climbed the stairs, all three of them, through the silent house. The wooden treads creaked beneath their feet.

As they reached the bedroom floor, a door opened and they saw a wavering shadow creep along the wall. A moment later, Symphorien Desbats stood before them, in his nightshirt, a terrifying image of emaciation.

"What have you three been plotting at this time of night? It'll soon be day."

Mathilde explained that they had been made nervous by Andrès' failure to return. She was sorry, she said, that they had wakened him.

But by this time the old man was screaming his head off:

"You're lying! I heard the car... Andrès got back ages ago... I want to know what you've been up to!..."

Gradère interrupted him, speaking loudly: "So now we mayn't even talk!—that's the latest, is it? If there's a thief in this house, he won't, I don't mind saying, be found among us!..."

Desbats stood leaning against the wall, spluttering unintelligible sounds. Catherine appeared, she, too, in a nightgown, and moved close to her father. While Mathilde was explaining to her all over again that they had been waiting for Andrès to come home, and that Symphorien had been frightened, the girl, paying not the slightest attention to her mother's words, took the sick man by the shoulder and led him away.

The others heard the key turn in the lock. Gradère signed to Andrès and Mathilde to stay where they were for a moment, and to hold their breath. They could hear Catherine's voice through the wall that separated the rooms from the corridor.

"You might have caught your death! . . . And all to no purpose. . . . You know I'm keeping my eyes skinned. . . ."

"This proves that you're *not*. . . ."

"I've got to get *some* sleep, like everyone else. . . ."

The old man mumbled something but what it was they could not hear. Catherine had gone back to bed, and she raised her voice in order to speak to him from the other room:

"*Of course not!*—really, father you must be out of your mind! I can believe him capable of most things, but not of that! . . ."

Mathilde and Gradère avoided one another's eyes. She made as though to give Andrès a kiss, but he turned away his head.

There was a sound of door-handles being turned, of bolts being shot. The place became once more a country house wrapped in sleep and mist a short while before cock-crow.

X

AS soon as she was dressed next morning, Mathilde knocked at her husband's door to learn his wishes before ordering the day's meals. But he did not, as he ordinarily did, call to her to come in. It was Catherine who opened the door a mere crack.

"He had a terrible time of it as a result of that fright. . . . He's only just got off to sleep."

"Good, then I won't wake him."

"He was fighting for breath all night, mamma. . . . I thought he was dying. . . ."

"Why didn't you come and call me?"

Catherine looked at her steadily:

"You wouldn't if you'd been me. The mere sight of you would have been enough to bring on one of his fits. . . ."

"I've never been an object of terror to your father, my dear. He had always had complete confidence in me. . . . What was that you said?"

Catherine uttered a harsh laugh: "Nothing . . ." she said, and almost slammed the door shut. Mathilde stood for a moment on the landing. She felt no anger, but, rather, that sense of relief which comes when one hears news long expected, when what one has anticipated is confirmed. She did not admit to herself that what she had heard was the cause of her present pleasure, did not even enquire whether that were, indeed, the case. 'Catherine must have been exaggerating when she said she thought he was dying . . . those terrible coughing fits always give one that impression.'

She had rested her large, handsome hands on the polished rail of the banisters. Above her head the rain was drumming on the skylight which illuminated the staircase—a steady, unbroken, settled rain. . . . 'Winter's started with a vengeance,' thought Mathilde. 'The Frontenac meadows will soon be lakes.'

There was somebody she must see at once, somebody to whom the news she had to tell would be of great significance, unimportant though it might have seemed at first. She took a few steps along the corridor and knocked at Gabriel Gradère's door. He told her to come in, but as soon as he saw who it was seemed suddenly confused and began to make excuses:

"I didn't know it was you . . . I wouldn't have allowed myself . . ."

He was still in bed, smoking and reading a book. "Don't worry . . . I won't look at you . . ." she said with a laugh.

He buttoned up his pyjama jacket, but not before she had been

struck by the whiteness of his chest. Fifty years old though he was, he still had the physical attributes of a child. His body had not altered since the days when they had gone bathing in the mill-pond, above the lock, and she had watched the young Gradère hesitating to dive . . . (the drops of water sparkling on his skinny shoulders in the sun).

"Look here, Gabriel, there must be no repetition of yesterday evening's little game. . . ."

"What little game?"

She found the frankness of his gaze embarrassing.

"You know perfectly well what I mean. . . . My husband's had a terrible night. . . . Catherine—though she always likes to dramatize everything so as to show me in the worst possible light—says he very nearly died. . . ."

He crushed the stub of his cigarette into the ash-tray, and she recognized as something familiar the bare arm with its undeveloped muscles, the hand covered with a rank growth of hair. His voice, when he spoke, was very quiet:

"I shouldn't have been much surprised if he had. Clairac told me that any violent emotion . . ."

"No!" broke in Mathilde with sudden violence, "no!"

"What do you mean—no?"

She remained silent, and, crossing to the window, pressed her forehead to the streaming pane. The world was a welter of waters. For weeks, perhaps, the rain would shroud the house and park, separating them from the outer world. They would be living, all of them, in an Ark, in a ship.

Suddenly Gradère flung a question at her:

"Do you love your husband, Mathilde?"

"What a thing to ask! Of course I do!"

He smiled and lit a cigarette.

"It's difficult to explain things to you," she said. "We're not in the habit, hereabouts, of facing that sort of problem. Symphorien

as remained for me, fundamentally, just precisely what he was before we got married. When my father died, he took over, as you will remember, the management of my affairs, and he has continued in the same rôle. . . . There has never been any question between us of passion or fine feelings. . . . I am grateful to him for having piloted my ship well and truly . . ."

"No doubt, my dear. Still, there *was* a period when he was rather more than a mere man of business. . . . After all, Catherine didn't just drop from the skies. . . ."

"Oh," she exclaimed, "all that's so long ago, and lasted for so short a while—two or three months at most. . . . He very soon realized that it was no good his being exigent . . . that he wasn't intended by nature to play the part of a lover. I can swear with my hand on my heart that I find it difficult to remember, that I no longer have any clear idea of, our marital relationship. . . ."

"At heart, Mathilde, you're still a young girl. . . ."

All of a sudden she felt that her cheeks were burning, and turned back to the window with a shrug.

"A young girl, Mathilde. . . . You are willing to accept without repining the fact that life was over for you almost before it had begun. . . . But life has a way of being less cruel to us than we are to ourselves. . . . It will not stay content with the fate we think it easier not to quarrel with, but floods back on us with a gift of just those things we thought were far removed and inaccessible. . . ."

"I don't know what you mean," she murmured.

He continued as though he had not the slightest doubt that she would follow his meaning.

"I have a vivid recollection of the Mathilde I once knew, of the child Mathilde, so pure and so very innocent. . . . Still . . . do you remember the 'jouquet'? . . ."

She spoke now with passion:

"You have said enough! Don't say any more!"

Lying there on the bed, his white hair looking rough and

tousled, he seemed as though sunk in a dream. A few moments passed; then, suddenly:

"Have you seen Andrès this morning?" he asked.

"No, not yet: I have nothing to say to Andrès."

"I suppose you know that his lady-love has melted into thin air? . . . Vanished? We've got to keep him here. We've got to see that he doesn't become unmanageable. I rather hope she'll write him a letter. It's the only thing'll persuade him to be patient. Hunt for that Andrès of yours, my dear. The prospect before *me* is a good deal drearier. I've got to have a drink with Clairac. . . . The doctor and I have quite a passion for one another. I gave him a bottle of the real stuff, the sort they keep under the counter in the bars of Ciotat and Cassis . . . since when, he even gets up in the night for a swig. . . ."

Mathilde left the room with an eagerness that made her feel ashamed. 'What's the matter with me?' She had a perfect right to look for Andrès, and it would be absurd to renounce it. Besides, she must keep an eye on him. . . . She knew him only too well. . . . He would never stand up to pain. She felt feverish—worked on, at one and the same time, by apprehension and hope.

She entered his room as usual, without knocking. He was standing in front of the mirror, bare-armed, engaged in shaving himself. He turned on her in a blazing temper:

"This isn't a mill-house! Have I got to lock my door?"

She stood on the threshold, overcome by the nature of her reception:

"But Andrès, darling . . . I suppose I *do* treat you like a little boy. . . ."

She could have thought of nothing better calculated to calm him. He walked across the room and kissed her:

"You're just dear old Tamati. . . ."

He gave her another kiss but she did not return it, but left the room. He followed her into the corridor.

"Postman not come yet?"

"Of course not, dear. You know he never turns up till between eleven and twelve."

From now on he would live for the postman, she thought. One can give one's mind only to a single person at a time. One person, and one only, exists for us: we can do no more than make pretend that we believe in the reality of any others. His "old Tamati" . . . she shook her head, as though she were chasing away a wasp, and went into the kitchen to give the day's orders to Gercinthe. On her way upstairs later, she ran into Catherine.

"I was looking for you, mamma. . . . Father wants to see you. . . . There's no need to run"—she added in an edged voice.

By the time she reached her husband's room, Mathilde was noticeably out of breath. He was sitting as usual, huddled in his chair. She could not remember when she had seen him last in bed. He was unshaven and unwashed. She felt as though his brooding eyes were reading deep in her mind. She could hear the whistling sound made by his breathing. He was smoking a herbal cigarette.

"Sit closer, so's I needn't strain myself. . . . I'm no worse in meself, but I'm getting more and more breathless. When it comes on in the autumn it's always worse and lasts longer. . . . I want to have a chat with you, to ask you a question. . . . Look here, Mathilde, in spite of what happened last night, I trust you. . . . But I'd like to be sure you aren't in a plot with the others against me, that you're still a free agent. . . . Promise me that is so and I'll believe you. I want to believe you. Catherine's only a child, I can't talk to her; besides, she takes things too hard."

It was true. There was probably only one person in the world of whom Symphorien Desbats was not suspicious, and that one person was his wife. She was as well aware of that as of the prestige she enjoyed in his sight. But she did not know the underlying reason for his attitude. *She* might pretend that she had almost forgotten the two or three months of her married life of which she

had been reminded while talking to Gradère, but to him they were an ever-present reality. Her old husband remembered only too well his wretched moments of failure, his no less wretched moments of success, and he was grateful to Mathilde for never having held them against him, for having always been attentive to his wishes, for having unfailingly given him good advice, except where Andrès' interests were in question.

She answered him, now, carefully weighing her words.

"There is no plot. If one existed, and I knew of it, I should have told you. But don't be in a hurry to thank me. I'm only too conscious of what you've been hatching against Andrès."

"You're wrong, my dear . . . I swear it. . . I knew, of course, that Catherine had her knife into him, but up to the last moment I thought she would agree to marry him, because, as no one knows better than you, she's a mad creature."

Seeing that Mathilde looked surprised, he developed what was in his mind:

"I mean it: if she weren't, she would never have resented his indifference. Time and time again she has said to me—'if only he'd try to deceive me, if only he'd pretend . . .' She knew all about this love affair of his long before the rest of you . . . so, you see, I had some reason for believing that she would agree to marry him in the end, no matter how often she told me she wouldn't . . . and I rather dreaded it. I know how fond you are of him, my dear. But just think what Andrès is, what it would have meant to have him as a son-in-law. He's not a bad lad, but he is the child of . . ."

The sick man glanced uneasily at the door and lowered his voice:

"You don't know what I know. You've no idea what Gradère's capable of, of what may burst on us at any moment—I have my spies—and when the worst happens, you'll thank me on your bended knees for having done what I could to prevent that awful

man from becoming your daughter's father-in-law. If such a day should ever dawn, it would be a day of shame for us . . ."—he was drawing his breath now so painfully, and speaking in a tone of such fervour, that Mathilde was frightened. . . . "Why, the police might come for him in this very house. . . . Of course, he's only our cousin by marriage, but Andrès being there makes him one of the family . . . I can't talk to you openly, Catherine's the only person to whom . . ."

Mathilde drew her chair closer.

"You can trust me," she murmured. "You know I'm as secret as the tomb. I don't *want* Andrès to marry Catherine. . . ."

It was the first time she had shown any sign that she was opposed to the marriage. She had always behaved as though Andrès' happiness depended on it. The sick man pressed his wife's hand with an expression on his face of trust and joy. He could tell her everything!

"If you need proof of how much she wants him, you need only realize what a good offer she's refused . . . Berbiney's boy . . . Berbiney, my partner at the factory. . . . In spite of the drop in real-property values, their land is still worth an awful lot . . . and land will go up again once they've re-valued the franc—as they're bound to do. My poor dear, the fact that we've never discussed all this before shows how far apart we've drifted during the last two or three years!"

"It stands to reason"—she broke in vehemently—"that you couldn't talk about this Berbiney scheme while you were making me believe all the time that you wanted to give Catherine to Andrès! . . . Now that you've stripped him of Cernes and Balisaou . . ."

"But just consider for a moment. His father would have made him sell them, in any case. You must know perfectly well that he leads Andrès by the nose. What matters is that Cernes and Balisaou should not be allowed to go out of the family. You do

agree about that, don't you? Why, the thing's self-obvious. If they did, there would be a bit of somebody else's land jutting into the estate, and that would make it impossible for the property to be held as a single whole. I did no more than my duty," he added with a disarming air of conviction. "I've told you the bare, unvarnished truth. Up to the very last minute I was afraid the girl might fling herself into his arms. As to the wretched *Andrès*, *he's* been fleeced by his swine of a father even before the money's been paid over. As it is, I'm indemnifying him. Until I die he'll live rent-free, with an allowance considerably in excess of anything *Cernes* and *Balisaou* would have brought him—and they'll still be in the family. . . . When I'm gone, and if you survive me—because one never knows who's going to live and who's going to die—well, you can give him just as much as you like—but in cash, mind,—you're not to make over a single foot of land to him. You must swear that you won't do that! But how do we know where *Andrès*'ll be when that time comes? I'm really very sorry for him. He's not a bad lad, but, well, that's how things are—the children pay for the sins of their fathers—it's a law of nature."

Mathilde was listening to him with deep attention. She had recovered her self-control, and was now perfectly cool and collected. The important thing for her was to find out the precise nature of the threat hanging over *Gabriel's* head, so that she might be able to put him on his guard. She would not accept the "law of nature" of which her husband had spoken. It was a wicked law, and she was determined that it should not apply in *Andrès'* case. But *Gradère*, so she told herself, could stand up to the whole world. He only needed to be warned. He would find some way of countering the attack that had been planned at his expense.

"I am very glad that we have had this talk, *Symphorien*. I can't agree that you have treated *Andrès* properly, but I do believe now that you acted in good faith."

He took his wife's hand and pressed it.

"You *must* trust me. You know how fond I am of Andrès. . . . It is essential that I know the nature of the danger that is hanging over his father . . . so that I can get his son out of harm's way . . . protect him . . . send him off somewhere in good time. . . . It might, for instance, be possible for him to go on a trip to Norway. . . . He ought to have a look at the paper-mills. . . . Come closer and listen to me" (the old man lowered his voice to a whisper). "I've known for some time that a woman is blackmailing Gradère—he told me so himself, though it wouldn't have been difficult to guess. Now, if a resourceful fellow like that lets himself be sucked dry, year after year, it can only mean that *she's* in possession of a pretty deadly weapon. . . . I've discovered the address of this Aline creature—it wasn't hard, I only had to take a peep at Gradère's mail last time he was here. . . . He's a man of great determination. Nothing will get him out of this house. He's made up his mind to do me down. He's strong, and I, Mathilde, feel very weak when I'm up against him . . . because of my state of health. . . . Clairac thinks I'm worse. . . . He never says it in so many words, but . . . and I'd never tell this to anyone but you . . . he's becoming a bit of an alarmist. . . . I don't really believe in all his gloomy talk, because I'm pretty sure I'm not near so bad as he makes out . . . but, well, the sooner we can get rid of that swine Gradère, the better—don't you agree?—no matter what it costs. . . . I wrote a letter to this woman Aline, and the answer came this morning. What it amounts to is that she agrees to take him off our hands. She'll turn up here when he least expects it. . . . It'll cost me a pretty penny, but I shan't pay her until she's proved as good as her word. This time she's quite resolved to sink him because she knows he's at the end of his resources. I've offered her what amounts to a small fortune on condition that she does the job thoroughly. . . . You know whom I mean by the Marquis de Dorth?—I told you all about his wife's

letters which Gradère was showing round before disposing of them to her husband for a hundred thousand francs . . . the daughter was engaged to a man who's since backed out as a result of the scandal. . . . I hear she's gone completely out of her mind. . . . But that's no business of ours. . . . The only thing that matters to *us* is that the Marquis means to have his scalp, that he's said what he's willing to pay, and that this Aline creature has struck a bargain. If Gradère looks like being arrested, or even cornered, if it comes to that, I think you'll agree it's best that the business should come to a head as far from here as possible . . . though once the mud's been stirred up, we're bound to be spattered no matter how far off we are."

Mathilde wanted to cry out "We must stop it: for Andrès' sake we must stop it!" but restrained herself. Nothing now would alter her husband's determination. She must pursue the plan she had already thought out—pretend to fall in with the old man's wishes, discover as much as she could, and then warn Gabriel. Because of Andrès she must take sides with the villain of the piece . . . for the man *was* a villain, even if, only a short while ago, he had been able to set her trembling merely by uttering the word—"jouquet." . . . Thirty years ago she had laid her head, in all innocence, on his bony shoulder, and closed her eyes. She could still remember the noise made by the curtain of the falling rain. . . . It had been the one and only adventure of her life. . . . Everything that mattered to her had been contained within the walls of a "jouquet." Life had brought her nothing else, and now nothing else would ever be hers. . . . Nothing? . . . Preyed upon though she was by the confused medley of her thoughts, she was still all ears for what the old man was about to tell her.

"The letters I write her are quite impersonal, and, naturally, I don't sign them with my name. I'm nothing if not cautious! There is no indication at all to show where they come from. So's she shan't guess anything from the envelopes, I always give them

to Berbiney when he goes into Bordeaux on Mondays. I send nothing from Liogeats—don't trust the postmistress. Well, to cut a long story short, this precious Aline's due to arrive on Monday evening—in three days' time. Catherine will meet her at the station. As soon as she gets here, we'll let her loose in Gradère's bedroom. She'll catch him fast asleep. "I guarantee" she wrote me, "that he'll leave with me by the first train on Tuesday. . . ." Things are beginning to hum, as Andrès'd say. . . . Oh, yes, they'll hum all right. . . . I'm doing the boy a service, you know" (with a nervous glance at Mathilde). "Once the blow has fallen, he'll forget the whole business in next to no time, and we can keep him with us here. What's the point of sending him on his travels, and spending a lot of money? He'll go on looking after the estate just as though it were his own, and, in the long run, Catherine will make a match of it with the Berbiney boy. . . . You're not going?"

"Of course not," said Mathilde, who had got up. "But I think you're talking too much and getting too excited."

She made as though to put her hand on his forehead, but he seized it and pressed it to his dry lips.

"Catherine would be furious if she knew I'd been confiding in you. . . . She's not fair where you're concerned . . . jealous, I suppose. . . . But I don't regret anything . . . on the contrary, I feel distinctly reassured. . . . You've always had a horror of the fellow . . . and you've every reason to hate him, if only on Adila's account. . . ."

In a voice that seemed to sound the very note of frankness, she replied:

"I don't know whether I hate him, but I certainly think him horrible. . . . He frightens me, too—there's no doubt about that!"

The sick man, freed of his anxiety, rubbed his hands with an air of jubilation, till the joints cracked.

"My mind's at rest now. All you've got to do is to keep Andrès'

attention occupied. Once we're through, I'm sure you can convince him that what has happened is all for the best."

Only just in time she snatched away her hand which he had been pressing between his own. Catherine came into the room and shot a suspicious look at the pair of them. Mathilde found relief in the joy of having something to tell, the same sort of joy as sets children running when the excitement of impending disaster has hold of them. But it would be rash to go straight to Gradère, because Catherine, no doubt, would keep a watchful eye on both of them. . . . She understood, now, the reason for the doctor's alarmist words to his patient. Gabriel was strong—stronger than any of them, and he would find some way of parrying the blow.

It was raining harder than ever. Mathilde remained on the watch in her room, holding the window slightly parted so as to be able to make a sign to Gradère when he came back. She felt far from bored as she waited. To have occupied the time in any other way would have been beyond her power. She, too, was driving straight to her goal, to that vast, vague happiness towards which she had been moving ever since Gabriel's return. She would reach it at last, thanks to him, for he was powerful enough to open its gates to her. . . . What harm was she doing? Why should she feel ill at ease? If she had had to make her confession at that very moment, there was no crime of which she could have accused herself. Was it not her duty to warn Gradère? His life was at stake, Adila's husband's life, Andrès' father's. "But" said a secret voice within her, "you know perfectly well that Gradère means nothing to you. You know perfectly well what to expect of him. . . ."

"I expect nothing!" she said aloud.

She was seated with Andrès and Catherine at the table when Gradère entered. Mealtimes now had become occasions of silence. Catherine got up before the sweet course, and left the

room to go to her father. Mathilde took advantage of the brief respite, when she heard the girl's footsteps overhead and knew that she was not being spied upon, to murmur to Gradère that there was something very important she had to tell him, and that he must meet her in a safe place. But nowhere in the daytime was safe, because the rain kept everyone indoors.

"Come to my room to-night," said Gradère. "It's the furthest from the old man's."

"But suppose I was caught—what would people think?"

"You won't be caught, and besides, we've got other things to worry about. What you want to tell me is pretty serious. . . . I've a pretty shrewd idea what it is. . . . It's about Aline, isn't it?"

She nodded assent. He raised his two fists and let them fall.

"Ah! that woman!"

At sight of the hatred in his face, Mathilde turned away her eyes.

XI

LATE the same afternoon, Andrès was lying on his bed smoking the last cigarette from the packet he had opened that morning. He had spread a newspaper under his feet so that his muddy boots should not dirty the coverlet.

Through the door came the voice of Gercinthe saying that the curé would like a word with him.

"It's you he's asking for, Monsieur Andrès. . . . I've shown him into the big drawing-room."

It was only after the lapse of some seconds that Andrès' mind established a connexion between "the curé" and "Tota's brother." In a flash he was off the bed. This was the long-awaited answer, Tota's answer, given in about as bad a form as it well could be. Now that the wretched curé was mixed up in the business, there

was no hope left. He ran down the stairs without even bothering to smooth his hair, and burst, a tousled figure with drawn face and open collar, into the huge, gloomy room which, in spite of the radiators, was icy cold. Armchairs covered in dust-sheets stood against the wall, flanked by large consoles in fake buhl. Above them hung a row of fairly good portraits, by the early nineteenth-century Bordeaux painter, Gallard, of members of the Du Buch family. The crystal chandelier, enveloped in a muslin bag, was reflected in the shiny surface of a heavy Empire table on which lay photograph albums, a draught-board, and a stereoscopic apparatus. In the middle of all this litter was the curé's hat, an odd, battered object, looking like a dead bat. Andrès gave a sidelong glance at the little priest whose squat, thickset figure was not unlike his own (there was some excuse for the mistake made by Mouleyre and Pardieu). But in the young man's serious and prematurely lined face he could read neither shame nor anguish. For Andrès the word "priest" stood for a jumble of ready-made ideas about which he had never taken the trouble to think. He had been one of those innumerable children who "make their Communion" because it is the customary thing to do, who never concern themselves with its implications. . . . Had he been pressed to give his views, it would have been obvious that he looked on the whole business as boring and unimportant, as something of which it would be time enough to talk when he was lying at death's door, as something that gives a gloss of respectability to weddings and funerals. The only other feeling of which he was conscious, as he looked at this young and lonely celibate, was one of profound masculine disgust and physical loathing.

"I think, sir," began the priest, "that you must have guessed on whose behalf I have come to see you?"

Andrès made no movement, but stood with his head bent slightly forward as though he were awaiting a blow on the back of the neck.

The other continued: "I have some knowledge of what you feel for somebody who is very dear to me. . . . You must be brave. . . . She has done what I had given up hoping she would do, something that ought to make you as happy as it makes me—because I do you the credit of believing that your love is genuine. She has gone back to her husband. I had a line from her this morning to that effect."

"So you've got your way, after all!" broke in Andrès, and there was a note of bitter hatred in his voice.

The Abbé stammered in reply that the news of this decision had come as a great surprise to him, that he had long given up any hope of it, that he still felt bewildered.

"People are right when they talk about the power of the priests," said Andrès: "you always manage to get your way."

"You are wrong: I am very far from having any power."

Unused though he was to observing his fellows, Andrès was struck by the tone of voice in which this was said, and, raising his eyes, looked straight at Tota's brother. The realization that he *was* her brother prompted the stare that he directed at him. There was nothing in the man's features to remind him of the woman, yet there was, as it were, an echo of her in the lined and hollow cheeks, in the bend of the mouth, in the way the nose was set, in the quality of the look that returned his own . . . an echo of all that he had lost.

Words suddenly burst from him: "You can't possibly know . . . I'm not blaming you . . . you can't possibly know. . . ."

The Abbé took him shyly by the hand. Andrès made to attempt to withdraw it.

"You priests," went on the young man, "don't understand these things. You don't realize what love means."

He was amazed to hear a low laugh which the other quickly suppressed. He looked at the priest, who said quite simply:

"Do you really believe that?"

The little spurt of laughter came again. Suddenly, in the impersonal tones of a confessor addressing his penitent, the Abbé went on:

"You love greatly, but you must love more greatly still—by renouncing her."

Andrès was moved once more to furious rebellion: "You don't know what you're talking about! D'you think my renunciation is going to make her happy? You regard me as a fool, like the rest of 'em. But just you wait! I'll find some way of getting to her!"

"That would not be particularly difficult . . . a poor, hunted creature. . . . But my object in coming here" (there was a change in his voice, he was not far from tears) "was to beg you—for I know you have a good heart and have always sided with the poor—to have pity on her. I don't intend to talk about myself. You can't know—you are young—but because you are young you should be able to understand what a life like mine is like . . . quite probably Tota has discussed it with you. I am the same age as you—twenty-six. Everyone either hates or despises me. Even my superiors think me guilty of imprudence. The thought of her is the only thing that keeps me going. . . . I have never said as much to anyone before . . . you are the first. I implore you in the name of that God who will one day show Himself in His strength, which is greater than the strength of our mad desire to achieve damnation. . . ."

Life is rich in such extraordinary instances of the disproportion between the one who confides and the one who receives the confidence. The explanation is that the choice is taken out of our hands. A moment comes when agony must find an outlet, must tear itself free of the suffering womb. And when that happens, any arms will do, any arms at all, to take in custody the dark child of the soul. If Andrès in his youth and his simplicity did not fully understand the meaning of the words that he heard, he could, nevertheless, feel the torment that informed them.

He said:

"I'm not forgetting that I owe Mouleyre and Pardie a good punch on the jaw, and they'll get it, too. From now on, people are going to leave you alone—you can take my word for that."

Much later, Alain was to remember this moment, and how, suddenly, he had known with certainty that this youth who looked so strong, so self-sufficient, was already eddying like a straw in the wind. He had realized then that his presence in this room was not due to mere chance. The thought of Tota ceased to occupy his mind. She had no part to play any longer in the misery that gripped his heart. To himself he said: 'Have mercy, Lord, upon those who dwell in this house!'

Andrès, seeing that the other's eyes were brimming with tears, felt quite overwhelmed. In response to one of those generous impulses that come to the very young, he gripped his hand:

"I make no promise," he said, uncertainly. "I want her too badly. But I'll fight as long as I can."

The Abbé nodded. He was beyond the power of speech, and looked long and intently at the boy.

Andrès opened the door. In the dark hall-way a man was smoking, a man still young in spite of his silver hair, wearing a shooting coat. A handkerchief of the same colour as his shirt projected from his pocket. The smell of his cigarette reminded the Abbé of Tota's room.

"I don't know whether you know my father, sir?" Gradère got up from his chair. Although the rainy dusk made it impossible to see any of the faces clearly, the priest felt himself transfixed by the gaze of this man about whom people said so much that was bad. He had responded to the introduction with a low bow. Then he hurried on, shut the front-door behind him rather too sharply, and disappeared into the dusk and the rain.

He had gone only a few paces, struggling against the damp wind which set his soutane bellying, when he heard the sound of

somebody running after him. He turned. It was the man, Andrès' father, bare-headed, his hair blowing wildly.

"I'd like to have a word with you. . . ."

Alain, who was considerably the shorter, had to raise his face in order to hear. The sense of antipathy, of repulsion with which this almost invisible stranger filled him, made him feel ashamed. How he hated those gentle, almost honeyed tones!

"I have written you a letter, sir—though perhaps letter is hardly the right word. . . . I should say, rather, a volume, containing the story of my life, my very terrible life. . . . But I broke off in the middle. . . . I lacked the courage. . . . But now I know that I had to write it, that you have to read it. . . . May I leave this note-book with you?—just a plain, school exercise-book. . . . You can answer it or not, as you think best. . . ."

Alain made a sign of assent: "I am at the call of any man," he replied with a trace of affectation.

But he did not take the other's hand.

Gradère went back to the house, feeling chilled to the bone. Andrès had not noticed his absence.

"Papa, he came to ask me . . . he came because of his sister . . ."

Misery choked him, so that he had to break off.

"You'll tell me that I've only got to make up my mind . . . that all I need to do is hunt her out. . . ."

His father, whose face he could not see, interrupted the flow of words:

"No, my boy, I shan't tell you that."

Andrès thought—"He's afraid I'm going to ask him for money so's I can join her in Paris. . . ."

But Gradère's words bore quite a different sense:

"You can trust that little priest, I feel sure of that."

The young man showed no sign of surprise:

"Nothing matters to me any longer, papa"—he said, and his voice was eloquent of weariness and despair. "My marriage has

come to nothing—well, I don't care. As to Cernes and Balisaou—you've got the money . . . and I don't give a fig for anything else. What point is there in my staying on here? . . . What possible point?" He broke off, but continued, a moment later in a lower voice: "I didn't much like that talk we had yesterday evening . . . though I expect you'll think me a fool for saying so. . . . Why all this plotting? There's nothing more to keep you at Liogeats. . . ."

By this time it was pitch dark. Andrès might well have thought that his father had vanished. He could not even catch the sound of his breathing. But suddenly he heard his voice raised in the darkness. There was an edge to it that was unusual:

"You're wrong, my boy . . . there's something still to be done here. . . . As soon as my task is finished, I promise you I'll go . . . and you shall never see me again."

Andrès could think of nothing to say. He was not used to reading his own moods, to observing his own reactions. He belonged to that innumerable race of young people who find it enough to say "I've got a fit of the blues!"—finding in that word a sufficient explanation of all the myriad source of their misery and despair.

Suddenly, in the silence, he heard the sound of the door being quietly closed, and realized that his father was no longer with him.

XII

"I'LL wait a bit before leaving your room," said Gradère in a low voice. "Your talk with the old man must have roused Catherine's suspicions. She's very much on the alert. If she saw me go out . . ."

Mathilde replied: "Stay a little longer, then."

They could hear, outside the house, a quiet, all-enveloping

rustle of rain, broken at irregular intervals by the sharp sound of drops falling from the roof on to the balcony. The bedside lamp gave only a dim light. Mathilde could just make out a man's shadowy bulk on the sofa. His elbows were on his knees and he was biting his nails.

He knew the whole truth now. She had told him everything and already bitterly repented having done so. She was terrified by the sense of controlled power that he gave her. He had shown neither surprise nor anger, had uttered no exclamation. But had he given free rein to his fury Mathilde would have found it infinitely preferable to his present attitude. The close attention with which he had followed her every word, the calm way in which he had questioned her about the details of the scheme, had impressed her more unpleasantly than any outburst could have done. And now, here he was, harking back to the same points:

"You're quite sure it's Catherine who is to meet her at the station? . . . You're clear that Desbats told you he had typed the letters on unheaded paper, and had them posted in Bordeaux? That's very important. . . ."

"Why is it important?" she asked.

He made an evasive gesture and plunged once more into his silent thoughts. She looked across the room at him. His hands were clasped tightly, and he was holding them against his cheek. It was she who had set this invincible machine in motion. She was like a careless child who throws away a match. Suddenly the forest is a mass of flame. The tocsin sounds from steeple to steeple, and the roads are a hurly-burly of cars and carts. . . . In vain she had begged Gradère to go away, to find some hiding-place. He had chosen instead to face the coming danger. She ought never to have spoken. Aline, in that case, would have come and would have taken him away with her. . . . There would have been a brief scandal, a stirring of the waters . . . and then, a blanketing silence. . . . They would have sent Andrès to Scandinavia. . . . She had

always been against that trip, but now would welcome it. . . . Useless to think of these things. The die was cast, unless . . . she *could* throw herself at Symphorien's feet and admit her treachery. A telegram *could* be sent telling Aline to postpone her journey. Tragedy *could* be averted. . . . Such were her thoughts as she walked up and down the room. It was Gradère now who followed her with his eyes, watching her closely.

He was aware of the danger. He had always had these sudden intuitions which revealed to him what his adversary was thinking. He could smell treason even before it had taken shape in the mind of his accomplice. He asked:

"You're sure Catherine's not going to take the car so as to avoid attracting attention—sure that they're going to walk back from the station?"

"Since you seem to know the answer, why ask me?"

"Oh, well, let's change the subject. I, too, have got a piece of news for you. The Abbé Forcas came to see Andrès this afternoon. I suppose you can guess why? It seems that the lady has made it up with her husband. The little priest did a bit of coaxing, and our Andrès has given up all ideas, for the time being, at least, of pressing his advantage. . . ."

Mathilde uttered an "Ah!" and paused in her pacing to and fro.

"It's a matter of great importance for us, for you. . . . It means that you'll have to take him on, watch him—though without seeming to—surround him with attentions. . . . But don't go on treating him as though he were a child. Change your methods. What he needs now is the presence in his life of a woman, of a woman's tenderness. Things may start moving pretty quickly now, believe me! But whatever you do, don't worry. I have a perfect right to take steps for my own protection. Whatever happens, don't forget that my first duty is to save my own skin."

He came close to her:

"You'll be free very soon now, Mathilde."

"But I don't need to be free," she exclaimed with vehemence: "there's nothing I want . . . nothing, I tell you. . . ."

Gradère signed to her to speak more quietly. Going to the door he pressed his ear to it.

"I think I can get back to my room now. . . . I quite understand, my dear, that you want nothing that you haven't got already. But *suppose* things should happen to you . . . the kind of things you're not counting on and never think about, what then? . . . Oh, well, wait and see. I'm not worrying. You haven't committed a single mistake since the game started. I shall never forget the service you've done me this evening. And you won't forget, either, in the days now very close at hand, when even at night you will no longer be separated from Andrès, that you owe your happiness to me. . . ."

She stifled a cry: "Stop! . . . You . . . you . . . filthy beast!"

But he was no longer there.

It did not occur to her to undress. She just stood in the middle of the room, thinking of nothing. She seemed to draw a positive happiness from this complete vacuity of mind. The idea came to her that she would take a soporific, so as to get to sleep more quickly. The medicine-cupboard was in her dressing-room which had a frosted and shutterless window giving on to the stableyard. Better, she thought, not to switch on the light, and started to fumble among the various tubes and bottles, trying to find what she was looking for. Bergère began to bark, then stopped. What was that creaking? She recognized the sound: it was made by the wooden door of the tool-shed. She climbed on to a stool and pushed the window slightly open. It was no longer raining, but the whole forest was dripping. Each time the wind rose it was as though another shower had started. It was not cold. Mathilde sniffed with delight the smell of rain-drenched earth. She had not been mistaken. Someone was coming from the tool-shed carrying a spade on his shoulder. He was making no attempt to conceal

his movements. He seemed to know that none of the bedrooms looked out onto the yard. He must, therefore, be someone familiar with the house. . . . As a matter of fact, she had already recognised in him the man who, a quarter of an hour before, had been sitting with her in her room. . . . Perhaps he had gone mad! He must be mad, for he had no business out of doors at that hour of the night, whether for good purposes or bad. He had had the look of a madman, had spoken like a madman, thought Mathilde as she went back to her room and swallowed two tablets. She preferred to think of him as that, to persuade herself that her diagnosis was correct. In any case, what she had caught him doing constituted no threat to anyone. Symphorien was fast asleep only a few yards away, and Aline had not yet left Paris. It would be time to begin worrying when Monday came.

Sleep was longer delayed than she had expected, but her limbs felt languid, her body comfortably relaxed. She remembered suddenly that she had forgotten to say her prayers. That would mean having to get up again and kneel down. Her courage failed her, and she compromised by hastily murmuring a few set phrases without in the least taking in what she was saying. Her fine arms closed about the ghost of an absent form. She felt upon her body a vast presence, light as a feather.

XIII

ON Monday morning Gercinthe called through the door, in her usual way:

"Mademoiselle Catherine wanted on the telephone." Seeing that the girl showed signs of surprise, her father said: "Must be the factory."

Apprehension of the coming explosion had increased his

breathlessness. "That woman" would be with them by evening, and he would take her straight to Gradère's room. Would blessed release come to them with the morrow? Gradère had great reserves of strength, but not where Aline was concerned. She had kept a tight hold on him for twenty years, and he had never been able to make her loosen her grasp. Could it be that Mathilde had been guilty of treachery? No, he had no anxiety on that score. Catherine had been watching her carefully, and was sure that nothing had passed between her and Gradère. . . . She might, of course, have slipped a note to him, but the girl would have got wind of it. Here she was, back again.

"It was a call from Paris, papa . . . that woman, Aline. She won't be here till Thursday. . . . She's had the 'flu, but not badly. She says she'll arrive on Thursday without fail."

"Did you speak to her personally?"

"Yes . . . *what* a voice . . . thick and husky . . . I've never heard one like it!"

"Well, we must wait till Thursday . . . though I regret the delay. . . . In matters of this sort, speed's the great thing."

Catherine was busy with her thoughts:

"Two more days. . . . By that time it may have stopped raining, and the walk from the station won't be so awful. I don't fancy floundering along a flooded road with that monster! I suppose you warned her it was a good twenty minutes' tramp?"

"Certainly I did, and it's the item of the programme she finds least to her taste. . . . But she realizes how necessary it is to take precautions with a chap as dangerous as that. . . . The slut ought to know him if anyone does!"

"I've made a discovery, papa . . . now don't get worked up. . . . It's not important, and the main thing is that we should be warned in time. . . . For the last few days Clairac's been taking his *apéritif* at Lacote's with . . ."

"Not Gradère?"

Catherine nodded.

"Are you quite sure?"

"But what does it matter, papa? You can always show Clairac the door, and have Pétiot instead . . . he's just as good a doctor."

"Maybe, but he doesn't know my constitution," groaned the invalid: "besides, it's very significant. It shows, don't you see, how Gradère is trimming his sails. It's positively terrifying. . . . I feel nervous on your account, too. . . . He wants to get you out of the way. . . . He'll hit on something, though I don't know what. . . . Poison, perhaps. . . ."

Catherine murmured:

"He's welcome to kill me if he wants to!"

But the old man did not hear her, and went on:

"That's why Clairac's been trying to frighten me lately. . . . It was that fellow's doing. He wants to work on my nerves. . . . Well, it's better I should know . . . and there's life in the old dog yet. . . . Still, that doesn't alter the fact that we *do* live too much cut off here. . . . Ah, dear child, if only . . ." (a wheedling tone crept into his voice) ". . . if only you could bring yourself to say yes . . . young Berbiney . . ."

She interrupted him almost aggressively: "You've forgotten the terms of our agreement: not another word on the subject until the first of January. . . ."

"But when I made that promise, I didn't know the sort of threat we should have to face. Just think what it would mean to have a man about the house, a big sturdy young fellow of no more than thirty on our side . . . a chap who could take that swine by the back of the neck and chuck him out of the window. . . ."

"But don't forget, papa, that Gradère is in his son's house here, which is as much as to say, in his own. Why shouldn't we move? . . . Your old house on the Square is still empty. . . ."

"What! leave the chateau . . . never!"

All his life he had dreamt of being the undisputed master of the

chateau of Liogeats. But so long as Andrès had been a minor, it had been impossible for him to set aside the legal act which enforced their holding of the house in joint ownership, and, for the last year, the young man, egged on by his father and Mathilde, had resolutely refused to sell his share.

"To think that I am part-owner with the son of *that* horror. . . . As for your precious Andrès, I confess that I'm getting heartily sick of the sight of his little bullet-head. . . ."

"You can say what you like about him, but no one can accuse him of being ugly."

"He seems handsome to you, because you've never seen other boys."

It was true enough; she never *had* seen other boys, though she had more than once been present at weddings, and went regularly to the races at Lugdunos and Bazas. There had been young men and to spare at those festivities . . . but with what eyes had she looked at them? For her there was but one young man in the world, and she might, had she so wished, have been his wife, ignored perhaps, even detested, but still his wife. At times he would have had to take her in his arms if only to be sure of having a family. What she occasionally imagined, or, rather, what she forbade herself to imagine (it was the sole burden of her confessions) would then have been a duty and not a sin. . . . It wouldn't matter that he did not love her.

"What are you thinking about, my dear?"

"I was listening to the rain and thinking how nice it is that I needn't go and meet that woman to-night."

About four o'clock on that same Monday, Catherine heard the car. She went to the window and saw Gradère enter the house and then leave it again almost immediately.

"Gradère's going out," she said. "He's carrying something, but I can't quite see what it is. Where can he be off to so late? . . . It's not time for the postman yet. . . ."

"Quick!—go after him, my dear. . . . To-day of all days, we must neglect nothing."

Catherine took down her oilskin and opened the door, as only she knew how, so that it made no sound. Symphorien heard her running down the path. To while away the time till her return, he took one of the ledgers from the pile that stood on the small table, within reach of his hand, and began to check the columns of figures.

She came back sooner than he had expected.

"Well?"

"You'll never guess! He went to the curé's house with a great fat envelope. Nobody answered his knock, and he pushed it under the door. Then he came home. Had you realized that he knew the Abbé Forcas?"

Sympholien pondered:

"I've no idea what they can have in common . . . except this affair of Andrès with his sister. . . ."

"Of course!" said Catherine angrily. "The letter must have had something to do with that squalid business!"

XIV

ON that particular Monday, the curé had been out on his bicycle, visiting some of the outlying farms (he was more likely to get a friendly welcome there than in the town). He got back about six o'clock, worn-out but happy in the knowledge that he had been kindly entertained in four or five of the houses at which he had called. He had been invited to drink with his hosts, had given their children sacred pictures, and had taken the names of several boys for his confirmation classes. On his way home through Liogeats, Madame Larose, who kept

the draper's shop, had asked him at what time he would be saying Mass on the first Friday in December. To crown all, a group of workmen belonging to the Desbats-Berbiney factory, had raised their caps to him. It needed no more than that to restore his self-confidence. Fortune had been smiling on him ever since Tota had gone back to her husband. He had picked up Gradère's envelope as he entered the house. He knew from whom it came, and the sight of it again brought on his gloomy mood. He felt tempted to throw it unopened into a drawer. But after a hurried meal, he went upstairs to his bedroom, put on his slippers . . . and was soon deep in the contents of the thin exercise-book.

An oil-lamp stood on the small table beside his pillow, lighting from below the hanging crucifix. He completed a page, paused for breath, raised his eyes to the figure of Christ as though to draw strength from it, and plunged once more into the sea of mud with feelings not so much of horror as of fear. The mystery of evil, brooding on which had always been his besetting temptation, that mystery at the thought of which Tota's brother had more than once lost heart, was here in his hands, packed tight between the blue covers of a small, ruled exercise-book. He read without pausing until he reached the passage where Gradère, obsessed by the Devil, had quoted something said to him by an old priest. . . . "there are human souls that have been given to *him*."

"No!" he protested in a loud voice: "No, oh God, not that!"

Alain did not believe that any soul could be given over entirely to "him" . . . for, if that were so, then all souls must be in like predicament, because, ever since the Fall, each generation of men had inherited from their forbears enough of evil to ensure their damnation—an obscure madness which, starting far back in the history of the Race, had been embodied in every individual, down to those still living—vices kept in chains by some, triumphant in others, coming to rank flower in great-great-nephews.

. . . But had not an invisible Being been given power over this corrupt substance, to hammer it into dust—an archangel? (though most men did not even know of his existence). Not only does he pound the hideous refuse of their poor hearts. He can make use of the longing in them for tenderness, of the passionate desire they feel to give themselves. . . .

‘Lord’—thought Alain, ‘I, too, know what loneliness means. And You, too, know well, having suffered it unto death in the night of that fatal Thursday and Friday, what loneliness a man may feel when the Father has abandoned him . . . do not permit your Enemy, the Power of Darkness, the Prince of this World, to use it for His purpose of damnation. . . . But whence comes His power? To whom is he answerable for his Princedom?’

From the little exercise-book with its innocent blue covers streamed an unending host of prostitutes and pimps, of homosexuals and drug-addicts and murderers. Brothels and prisons and penitentiaries, all the restrictive institutions of the State, showed to the eyes of his spirit as a sort of subterranean hive, as an invisible crypt, beneath the visible city. At this very moment, on a desert track in Africa, a penal battalion was marching to the tune of a filthy song. . . . Alain knew that he was prey to temptation, to his own peculiar temptation. Not the kingdoms of this earth were spread beneath his eyes, but its shameful secrets.

He had fallen to his knees, his hands clasped on the open exercise-book. Those hands of his, formed to bless and to absolve, were in contact with the page where, beneath each line, was the faint mark left by Gradère’s finger-nail. This ordained priest was praying on a written record of crime. In an effort of obedience he reminded himself of what had been taught him at the Seminary. No human creature has anything in himself but lies and sin. The power to love God is in the gift of God alone, and His love is His recompense to us for what His love has given. But if it is He who is the source of all good, it is we who are the source of all evil.

Each time that we perform some act of goodness, it is God who operates in us and through us; but every act of evil belongs to us, and to us alone. Where evil is concerned, we are, to some extent, as gods. . . .

"This man, Gradère, has chosen to be a god. . . ."

But all these truths that Alain strove to remember fell on the anguish of his soul like snow on a fire. Snow! snow! He was reminded that a holy woman had once seen the souls of the damned falling into darkness like innumerable snowflakes. Not all the rustling of the rain upon the presbytery roof and the flooded roads could break the almost tangible silence of that living snow, of those layers on layers of human souls falling, falling, piling up on one another in an endless descent.

He made a violent effort to resist—even before it had taken shape—a criminal desire to be himself a flake among those other flakes, a temptation (which filled him with horror) not to separate himself from the great host of the damned. He emptied his mind of all thought, made in himself a void, forced himself to be a spirit waiting . . . waiting. And from the depths of the ages came to his ears, distinct, the answer that Christ had made to that Apostle who had asked:

"Who then can be saved?"

"With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible."

With love all things are possible. Love turns the logic of the Doctors to foolishness. Did the wretched man who had poured into this child's exercise-book all the abomination of his life know of what good he was capable? Those who seem dedicated to evil may, perhaps, be chosen above their fellows: the very depth of their fall gives a measure of the vocation that they have betrayed. None would be blessed had they not been given the power to damn themselves. Perhaps, only those are damned who might have been saints.

Thus did Alain meditate upon his knees, his hands clasped upon a schoolboy's exercise-book. The rain fell harder. He told himself that it was rustling with just the same sound on the roof of the chateau of Liogeats, where, in one of the rooms, the poor soul who had covered these pages with scrawled writing was lying fast asleep. He was the father of that Andrès whom Tota had loved. . . . At that moment, he had an almost physical sense of the co-inherence of human souls, of that mysterious union in which we are all of us involved alike by sin and grace. He wept for very love of sinners. The whistle of a train came to his ears through the darkness. The wheels of a long line of trucks rumbled over the rails. The noise of escaping steam filled the air. He thought: 'That must be the nine-o'clock just running into the station.' Why should the arrival of that particular train have any meaning for him? Suddenly a load of sadness descended upon his spirit with so crushing a weight that he leaned his head upon the table. His forehead touched the thin, blue book.

The train drew in through the densely falling rain. The only persons on the platform were the station-master with his hood pulled over his head, a porter waving a lantern, and Gradère whose face was invisible beneath his umbrella. He walked rapidly towards a fat woman who was climbing with difficulty from a second-class compartment in which she had been the only traveller. From the third-class carriages came the clucking of a cageful of chickens. This was the moment at which things were going to begin to move! To imitate Aline's voice on the telephone had been child's play. But now the difficulties were about to start. It was essential that Aline should hear his explanations. Perhaps she would refuse to listen. . . . If only he could have sent her a telegram saying that he would meet the train . . . but it would have been madness to use the Liogeats post-office, and, if he had gone into Bordeaux, it would have looked strange. The

telegram would have been an important piece of evidence at the inquest. . . . He had already risked much by telephoning that morning from Lugdunos in Aline's voice . . . (but there had been no other way of preventing Catherine from going to the station). . . . No, it was better like this. The tone was what would really matter. . . . He must be sure to get that right.

"Hullo! Yes, it's me. . . . Bit of a surprise, eh? . . . Don't worry, I'll explain. Catherine's ill—running a fever . . . so the old man had to come clean. . . ."

Aline, petrified with fear, listened to him in silence.

"Let's get out of the rain. . . . I know all about everything, including that plot of theirs to get you to marry me and so leave the field clear. . . . You needn't have gone to all that trouble, you silly old cow . . . I'd already made up my mind to marry you. But you were a fool, let me tell you, to mix old Desbats up in our affairs."

Aline recovered her presence of mind. She took his arm so as to get her share of the umbrella.

"They've got him to swallow that tale,"—she thought:—"imagined it'd make things easier, I suppose. . . . Not such a bad idea, perhaps, after all."

"I'm not sure that I'm so keen on marriage as I once was, my pet. I shall have to think it over"—she said.

Gradère heaved a deep sigh. He was saved, and she—was lost. He gave her ticket to the porter as he had done his own on the evening of his arrival. Then, he walked her round the back of the station.

Aline put a point-blank question:

"But why, when you knew I was coming, didn't you bring the car? There was no reason . . ."

"Andrès took the car and isn't back yet."

Fortunately this explanation, which had come unpremeditated to his lips, was the simplest he could have thought of, the most obvious.

Aline started to grumble: "No dam' luck!" She clung to his arm, splashing her big feet in the puddles.

"A bare ten minutes' walk," he said: "I'll take you the short way."

They followed a path of trodden bark and sawdust which led between stacks of sawn planks in the direction of the town. Instead of emerging on to the road, he chose a track which skirted the outlying houses of Liogeats, and plunged into a patch of woodland. Rather imprudently he told her that this was a short cut.

There was no need for him to have said anything, for the woman had eyes only for her feet, and was concentrating her whole attention on avoiding the puddles and the ruts. It had been foolish of him to direct her attention to their surroundings. She made him raise the umbrella higher, and betrayed a certain amount of nervousness at finding that they were now among trees and at a considerable distance from any human habitation.

"This'll bring us out into the avenue of the chateau," said Gabriel. "The sandy soil's a great advantage in weather like this. It positively drinks the water. I hope you see now why I avoided the road—it must be a sea of mud by this time. . . . Here you can keep your feet dry. . . ."

"Dry!" protested Aline breathlessly. "Why, this blasted bracken's unloading water into my shoes in spoonfuls! And it's started to rain again!"

"No, it's only the sound of the wind that makes you think that."

"God Almighty!" groaned Aline: "I'm just about fed up! My skirt's clinging to my legs. . . . Are you sure this is the right way? . . . Are we anywhere near the house?"

Seemingly, he did not hear her, for he made no answer. They plodded on, unable to see the sandy track in the darkness, and tripping over roots which it was impossible to avoid.

"How dark it is, Gabriel. I've got a nasty feeling that we're lost. . . . Why don't you say something?"

She tried to free the arm which he kept tucked within his own, as he might have done had he been walking with his sweetheart. Of course they weren't lost! He was walking quickly, like a man who knows precisely where he is going, and she trotted at his side like an old and broken-winded dog.

Suddenly she stopped. The twisted heels of her shoes had become fast embedded in the sand. She flung her left arm round a tree-trunk.

"Not a step further am I going!" she panted. Then, raising her hideous, husky voice:

"Help!"—she screamed.

But the moaning of the wind and the noise of the falling rain drowned all other sounds.

Fifty yards away not a soul could have heard her.

"You're mad!"—said Gabriel in calm and level tones: "we're home. Can't you see the last of the trees, and that patch of open sky over there? That glimmer of white is the house."

She clung to her tree, getting her breath back, blinking her eyes. True enough, this *did* seem to be the end of the wood. There, where the pines stopped, must be the beginning of the garden. A white wall rose before them: yes, it was a wall, right enough! She drank down a great gulp of air. . . .

"What a fright you gave me, you old beast!" she said, almost affectionately. . . . "I felt sure you hadn't forgotten the room in the rue Lambert down in the Meriadeck quarter. . . . Remember how I nursed you as though you'd been my own son? It cost me a pretty penny too . . . every farthing I had. . . . We were in love, weren't we, Gabriel, in those days?"

She was no longer nervous, and actually led the way. She was walking as fast as she could so as to escape from her nightmare. Then, suddenly, she stopped.

"It's *not* a wall!" she moaned. "I can't see any roof or windows. Where are you taking me, darling? Where are we?"

"At the entrance to the park. We used to call this place 'The Rock' when we were children. The Du Buch girls and I used to come here often in the old days, for a tumble."

"What d'you mean, tumble, Gabriel? Why tumble?"

"Come on, take a look—don't be frightened."

They had reached a kind of cliff which overhung a tangled world. Because of the whiteness of the sand, Aline, in spite of the darkness, could make out a scene of miniature chaos—tiny mountains, diminutive craters.

"It's an abandoned gravel-pit," Gradère explained very calmly: "we're there."

"There?" she stammered.

He had loosed his hold of her. Where could she have run to? He was perfectly easy in his mind. He could lift his paw now and let the prey scurry a stone's throw off.

"Yes, you old bitch. . . . There was plenty of love going on in the rue Lambert . . . and ever since then you've been plucking me good and proper. . . . Oh, I'm not blaming you. . . . Feather by feather, you did it, and now you've come to the last handful. What are you going to do with your old chicken now, my girl?—after twenty-five years of it, eh?"

She swung round and started to lumber away at a jog trot under the trees. He made no effort to pursue her. She crashed through the dark undergrowth, and then, suddenly, fell to the earth with a sharp cry that broke off short. A long while she lay there, aping death. Not a sound could be heard but the vast rustle of the rain, the moaning of the tormented tree-tops and the chattering of her teeth. Perhaps he had lost track of her. Perhaps he was wandering aimlessly in the darkness. But suddenly a thin beam of light pierced the gloom, rested on her, and then went out. There was a noise of cracking branches. His terrifying voice spoke close beside her.

"Useful things, these pocket torches, aren't they?"

Two hands seized her ankles. He harnessed himself to her body, using her legs like the shafts of a cart, and dragging her over the ground. She clung with her hands to roots and trunks and briars. A raucous sound came from her throat: she could no longer use her voice.

At last he stopped:

"Up with you, my pretty!"

She made no sign of movement, and he kicked blindly into the fleshy mass before him, on the ground. All of a sudden, it struggled to its feet. He put his arm round her waist, pressing her to him as in a dance. In the most natural way in the world, he said:

"It was just here, Aline, when we were very, very young, that I used to take the two Du Buch girls by the hand, one on each side. 'Hold tight!' I'd say, and then we'd tear down at full speed,—like this. . . ."

He dragged her forward down the slope. She fell to the ground, screaming. In a wild fury, he started to roll her over and over, like a barrel, using hands and feet. By the time she reached the bottom she was suffocating and half dead. Quite calmly he dropped on her, crushing her with the full weight of his body. Then, without haste or passion, performed that act of squeezing her throat of which he had so often dreamed. A superhuman strength was in his fingers. He could have loosened them quite safely some time before he actually did so. Had it not been for the freezing rain, he would have gone on indefinitely. He would never grow weary of strangling her corpse.

He paused for breath before proceeding to the last stage of his task. He had not a dry spot on him. He was a sodden mass of rain and sweat. He made sure that no one had moved the planks which, the evening before, he had laid across the entrance to a cave which workmen, in the old days, had used as a shelter. He scrambled into the hole, and switched on his pocket-torch. The damned rain had seeped through somehow, and collected in the excavation he

had made here in readiness. 'This'll be the last bath she'll ever take'. . . How tired he felt all of a sudden. He clambered once more between the shafts, harnessing himself to her not yet rigid legs. The load he dragged behind him now no longer struggled. She had lost one of her shoes, and he had to go back to look for it with his torch. He mustn't go further until he had found it. . . . Ah, there it was, with its twisted heel. . . .

The effort demanded of him now was nothing compared with his labours of the previous night. Digging a hole is what takes it out of a man, not filling it in. All the same, the work left him breathless. His arms felt as heavy as lead, his legs ached. There had been some rotting straw and dead bracken across the hole, and this covering he now replaced. . . . No one ever came to this hide-out. . . . What about the spade? He took the handle out and buried it. He would throw the head into a deep pool that he had marked down in the Balion. No one would think of looking for it there. . . . What agony it was climbing the slope again! The rain was still falling. Gradère used the last ounce of his strength in an effort to reach the top. It was as though someone were leading him. . . .

. . . Everything was over and done with now . . . never again would he need anyone. He walked through the drenched darkness, pressing the head of the spade to his side till it cut his fingers. He turned into the road along which he had walked in the moonlight on the evening of his arrival. All that remained of that world of appearances now was the clinging mud and the endless, enveloping rain. He reached the bridge over the Balion. Once more he had to scramble down, sinking up to his ankles in the sodden grass, pulling his feet free of the mud with a sucking sound. He flung the spade into the stream, and regained the road. Already the physical marks of crime were upon him. He was emptied of his hatred. For a quarter of a century it had accumulated within him, drop by drop, and now, in a second, it was gone.

How well he used to sleep when he was twenty, in that room in the rue Lambert! Still, in imagination, he could see the torn wall-paper with the patches of dried blood where mosquitoes and bugs had been crushed. It had been his custom to wait until Aline's "clients" had left before going to warm himself at her fire. . . . So what? He had killed her in order to avoid being killed himself. What point was there in trying to find excuses?

But the violence of crime no longer buoyed him. Little by little a hideous fear began to dominate the confusion of his thoughts. A sense of solitude, such as he had never known before, weighed him down. He was alone now. What had become of the hot fire within him? Where, now, was the unseen guide, the insidious voice, the ever-present counsel? Till now he had acted like a blind man, had merely had to hold fast to the lead and let the dog pull him. But now the dog had broken the lead: the eyes of the blind had been opened. He could see even in the dark.

Nothing now but to wait until the alarm was raised. The hunt would soon be on. The hounds, with their noses to the ground, would be baying, and coming nearer and nearer. The first sign would be a few lines in the paper, references to a "wanted" witness. There would be talk of a police enquiry. He would be questioned—for an hour, for two hours, for a whole night. Relay after relay of torturers. They would get him at last by a process of sheer exhaustion. In a flash all his life would be revealed, all his hideous life. . . . Andrès would know! But if Aline's little plan had come off, he would have been found out in any case.

But for the unceasing rain he would have turned in by the roadside. . . . The Presbytery! . . . If only he could pluck up courage to knock at that door! Soaked to the skin, he crouched in the porch, his hands timidly stroking the doorstep. He touched it as he might have done a face, feeling its wrinkles beneath his fingers.

XV

THE house was fast asleep. He held his shoes in his hand—two solid lumps of mud. A streak of light was showing under his door. Had he left a light burning? He went in. Somebody was kneeling in front of Adila's little collection of sacred objects.

Mathilde got up and looked at him without saying a word. It was enough for him that she was there. He was shivering.

"I'm cold: let me get into bed."

He spoke as one asking a favour. He might have been taken for a beggar. He pulled off his drenched clothes. She turned away her head. She could smell the mingled stench of damp wool and sweat. He had pulled the eiderdown up to his chin, and she could see nothing but a head with chattering teeth and a frizz of white hair.

He said:

"You must take my shoes, get the mud off them, and hide my clothes."

She found her tongue at last: what had he done? where had he been?

"Over at the Rock," he answered. "Do you remember? I used to take Adila and you by the hand . . ." (then, suddenly lowering his voice) . . . "it was in self defence. . . . A man's got a right to save his own skin, hasn't he?"

His tone was that of a suppliant. The face that emerged from the sheets was the face of an old man.

"So, I'm your accomplice?" Mathilde voiced her feeling as a question; then, in sudden bewilderment—"Am I really your accomplice? . . . Of course I am, since I knew . . ."

"Nobody saw us. . . . She's been living in furnished rooms. . . .

She had had a quarrel with her landlady and never told her where she was going. The woman will find Symphorien's letters, but there's nothing to tell where they came from, and, anyhow, she's the last person in the world likely to stick her nose into any business that looks like turning into a scandal. . . . You could persuade her to keep her mouth shut. Aline was on her own . . . utterly alone. They'll look for her, I expect they'll ask me questions . . . but that won't get them far. . . . I've been here the whole time. . . ."

"What about the Marquis de Dorth?" Mathilde enquired sharply. "It was he who staged the whole thing, and he must have known about her projected trip. He'll talk to the police, and you know how he hates you. . . ."

Gabriel choked back a cry and sat up in bed. How *could* he have forgotten the Marquis!

"He's got no proofs. . . . I'll deny everything."

Mathilde shrugged her shoulders.

"Do you really think they won't pick up the scent? She was probably seen taking her ticket: one always is: someone always sees one. . . ."

"I'm not going to budge," he stammered. . . . "I shall go to ground here and wait. . . ."

Mathilde sat down on the bed. Without looking at him:

"What have you done with her?" she asked.

"We had a quarrel. She came here with the object of doing me down, didn't she? . . . I never meant . . . but when I heard her talking so cynically, well, I just saw red."

He was lying, even at this stage, defending himself, trying to find extenuating circumstances.

"I was unarmed. . . . Isn't that proof enough?"

"But why did you take a spade with you when you went out last night?"

He looked at her with terror and hatred in his eyes.

"So you were spying on me too, like the rest of 'em? Going to give me away, are you? . . . Better look out, my girl!"

She raised a finger to her lips. The sound of a smothered sneeze had come from the corridor. She half opened the door.

"Is that you, Catherine? Gabriel came along to look for me—he's got a violent fever. I'm going to cup him. The things are in your father's room, I think. Could you get them without waking him?"

Gradère heard Catherine's voice:

"He seemed perfectly all right to-day."

"He went to bed immediately after dinner. He's running a temperature."

Catherine said that she would go and look for the cupping-glasses. The door remained ajar. Gradère heaved a sigh of relief. . . . Mathilde was playing up, was beginning to lie. She put his wet clothes on the radiator in the dressing room.

Catherine came back with the glasses. Mathilde thanked her through the slit of the half-opened door, waited until she had gone off down the corridor, and then, spreading a newspaper on the floor, began to scrape the mud from his shoes with an old metal paper-knife.

When Gabriel stammered out a few words of thanks, she said harshly:

"It's for Andrès' sake."

Whether it was or wasn't, what did it matter? He was no longer alone. For the moment he was nothing at all, a mere discarded rag.

"What are you going to do? I suppose you had some sort of a plan?"—she fired the question at him point blank.

Of course he had a plan—to frighten the old man, frighten him to death—and he wasn't joking!

"Aline just wouldn't have turned up, and, as she never answered his letters, he wouldn't have had a scrap of evidence

against me. But he'd have felt that I was top dog, that it was I who was calling the tune, and he wouldn't have been able to stick it."

Mathilde shrugged: what a childish scheme! Anyhow, the situation was just as he'd planned, wasn't it? In what way was it different?

"It's I who'm different, Mathilde. . . . This business has shaken me up. . . . It wasn't childish at all. I'd have had him where I wanted him in next to no time, and without having to lay a finger on him."

"And do you really think I'd have stood by and done nothing?"

She realized that this protest had come rather too late in the day. Not that it mattered now. Symphorien was safe. The man with the chattering teeth couldn't harm a fly.

He was regaining his self-confidence, and began to rehearse their next moves.

"You made me go to bed immediately after dinner. You've been here looking after me, haven't, so to speak, left me for a moment. There's a pretty good chance that Catherine never heard me go out. Gercinthe's as deaf as a post, and the maids sleep down at the farm. I was careful not to use the main entrance of the station, and I'm pretty sure that no one recognized me with my umbrella open. The station-master and the porter both had their hoods up, and weren't bothering about anything except getting in out of the rain. . . ."

As she listened to him she was conscious of a vague feeling of disappointment. What had she expected of this coward? Faced by this simulacrum of a man, what was it she missed? She had depended on him. He had always seemed so strong, had held the promise of such happiness. He had led her through pleasant ways: not that she had been guilty of any serious misdemeanour, anything she need mention in confession. Still, the goal to which he had pointed had appeared to her as lovely beyond imagining. Was it really the fact of his crime that she held against him now?

Would she have despised him quite so much as she did if he had returned as a conqueror glorying in what he had done? Wasn't it the beaten creature rather than the criminal whom she held in horror?

"Something has just occurred to me, Mathilde. . . . I remember, now. . . . She never had any personal contact with the Marquis de Dorth. . . . She told me herself that their relations were very complicated because of his dread of scandal. They always communicated through a third party. We can be easy in our minds where he's concerned. *He* won't give anything away. . . ."

"What's the good of worrying our heads about it?" she interrupted in a hard voice: "The only thing we can do is wait and see. If nothing happens, life will go on just as though you had never come back to Liogeats. . . . It's odd the picture I had of you. . . . Of course, I always knew the kind of man you were, but I see now that I thought you strong and resourceful. . . . I was a fool! Whatever it is that you have done to-night (I don't want to know: I don't believe a single word you have told me, and I forbid you to mention the subject in my hearing) . . . whatever it is, the fact remains that you're the kind of man who thinks only of his own skin, who can't stand up to danger, who loses his head as soon as things get difficult . . . a poor skunk, when all's said!"

Gradère was sitting on the bed. He looked at her in silence. Let her abuse him as much as she liked. He was no longer cold, and was beginning to feel reassured. If the worst came to the worst, Mathilde's evidence would save him. The colour crept back into his cheeks: his sense of numbness was slowly wearing off. The reptile, safe once more in its hole, safe and warm, darted its tiny, silver-crested head above the blankets.

He had reacted violently to Mathilde's contempt. His understanding of the situation had been correct. She had snapped at the hook with a greediness that surprised even him. Well, she shouldn't, she mustn't, be disappointed. He would tread his chosen road. Everything that this woman expected of him he

would accomplish. Fortunately, she had shown no sign of tenderness. Had she done so it would merely have added to his terror and intensified his weakness. Her contemptuous pity, on the other hand, had the effect of driving him forward, made it possible for him to overcome the almost sexual exhaustion which had followed his performance of the act. . . . Aline's death was of no importance whatever. Of that he was sure. A filthy, drunken old hag had been swept into nothingness, that was all. The snake had swallowed the toad. What larger place in the order of the Universe did the night's execution occupy than that? He had, no doubt, brought to it rather more passion than he should have done; still, after all, one can hardly be expected to do away with a woman in cold blood.

"My dear Mathilde," he said, after a prolonged silence: "you are condemning me for a weakness that is purely physical. Rest assured: we shall go on now to the very end."

She protested with violence: why did he say "We"? What had she got to do with all this:

"Like all women, my pet, you are a hypocrite. . . . But I don't care. Hypocrite or not, you have revived my sense of responsibility . . . that's the honest truth—responsibility to you and to Andrès. . . ."

He pretended not to hear her protests, but went on:

"For the moment we must wait. . . . How we act must be dictated by circumstances. If nothing floats to the surface, we shall have 'em where we want 'em, and soon, too. . . . If I am questioned, I shall wriggle out, thanks to you. . . . Forewarned is forearmed. . . ."

Mathilde put a question in a low voice:

"Isn't there a danger that they may find . . . that they may find the spot where she is? . . . No, don't tell me! . . . All I mean is, are you easy on that point?"

A ghost of a smile showed on his lips.

"No places," he said, "seem so mysterious, so hidden, as those in which we played as children. Don't you remember how appalled we were when we discovered a bird-snare on that "desert island" in the middle of the Balion which we used to call the Beauty Spot? Well, the reason that the place where she is seems to me to be so inaccessible is precisely because nothing, so far as I know, has ever happened there since the days when I used to take you and Adila by the hand, and pull you down the slope. . . ."

"The Rock," said Mathilde very quietly.

"Yes, the Rock: a place of burial of which she was unworthy. It is we, the three of us, who ought to be lying there in the sand that once felt so soft and warm to our bare feet. . . . We must just wait. But I can't be everywhere. You must keep an eye on Andrès for me . . . he makes me uneasy."

"He's the same as he always is."

"His is a very simple, an animal, nature (I use the word in no derogatory sense). He is one of those who, when they are in love, are least able to stand up to the idea of separation, to the idea of *suppression*, one of those, more especially, who have no fear of death, because death has no meaning for them except the meaning that they happen to want at the moment—that of a condition in which they will no longer be conscious of the irreparable absence of the loved one. That is why you have got to keep an eye on him."

Mathilde, her hand on the latch, turned round to say:

"I probably know him better than you do. He may, I don't deny it, have had a disappointment that strikes at him through the senses. But I confess that the idea of him as a passionate man makes me smile! That's the point. How dare you, to-night of all nights. . . ."

Only when she had gone did Gradère realize that he had, in fact, been speaking of Andrès as though nothing had happened. Things are rarely important in themselves. The essential thing, if ever he should find the hounds of justice at his heels, was to maintain an attitude of easy detachment.

The deep sleep into which he fell almost at once was the measure of his weariness. At that moment, not Aline's body could have been so blind, so deaf, as this exhausted man, lying with his head thrown back and his mouth open. His hands, which he had not even bothered to wash, were crossed upon his breast.

XVI

IT was young Lassus who brought the note from the curé. Gradère carefully scrutinized the maid's face—the first he had seen that day. . . . There was nothing unusual about it. He felt reassured, but the letter made him uneasy. What a fool he had been, in the present circumstances, to put himself at the mercy of this ordained priest, and, especially, to do so out of the confessional. Still, the secrecy of confession covers any confidence that a priest may receive *qua* priest. He was not really afraid that the man might turn evidence against him. Nevertheless, the thought of opening the envelope filled him with a sense of repugnance. Had he not, perhaps, better just send a word to the writer that he had received his communication, and leave it at that? All the same, he decided to read the contents. It would be nothing but a lot of honeyed phrases—the kind of thing that priests always write.

"No matter how guilty a life may be, it can never surprise a man who knows men. We should feel astonished at nothing, my dear sir, save at that mystery by virtue of which you have only to tell over again, on your knees, all that your little exercise-book contains, for the last grain of the huge block that weighs you down to vanish, for there to be no difference between your soul and that of a little child, except for the presence of a few scars.

You are *not* damned. No human being is damned. You must

realize the astonishing nature of that grace whose beneficiary you are. Just think for a moment. The pious for the most part live and die in the odour of sanctity without ever knowing more of the supernatural than is revealed to them by Faith. How different is your case! If it be true that the Enemy of God and man really exists, then it is true that everything else exists too. How can you not kneel in thankfulness? The story of your wife, Adila, through whom salvation may come to you, has opened my eyes, the eyes of an unworthy priest whom the reading of your exercise-book (I confess it with shame) at first so sorely troubled. We must look to our end, for only our death can shed light upon our life. That poor woman attained to the heights because you had dragged her into the depths. But for her sin, would she ever have shown the measure of her virtue? Do you realize (but of course you do, for you have made it abundantly plain) that you have been, that you are, to all eternity, the husband of a martyr and a saint? . . .”

The further he read the more did Gradère feel rising within him that rage which he could never for long suppress. At the words *saint* and *martyr* he could read no further, but tore the letter into fragments and threw them into the grate. Standing in front of the mirror, he studied his reflection, the reflection of a sickly-looking man in pyjamas with tousled hair. He was breathing hard. There was a bronchial roughness in the sound. Still, there was nothing seriously wrong with the old carcase. Life was once more flowing in his veins—and more than life, a mysterious renewal of youth. He felt himself to be capable of anything. He could carry through any enterprise to success. When Mathilde entered the room she was surprised to find him up and dressed and ready for battle. He thumped his chest with his two fists. His voice, when he spoke, was gay:

“A man risen from the dead, eh, old girl!”

She did not answer him but turned away. There was a look

upon her face of bitterness and despair. She had not slept. Her cheeks were mottled with yellow patches.

"If you had been ill, I would have looked after you," she said at length. "But since you are perfectly hale and hearty it is as well I should tell you that I shall never again set foot in this room, and want no more confidences from you. All I can do is to ignore, is to forget, everything I know. May God have mercy on me! From now on, don't expect me to stir a finger. . . ."

"So now, just when the goal's in sight, you've gone flabby?"

"What can I possibly have in common with you? There is no 'goal' for me."

Just as she reached the door he said in a low voice: "Andrès."

She turned on him in a fury:

"You have stolen him from me! I have lost him, yes, lost him! He was my son, my much loved child. Then you came, and troubled what hitherto had been pure. You have poisoned all of us. Now he flees from me. There can no longer be any doubt of that. This very morning I tried to go into his room, but he turned me out. The sight of me is horrible to him. I can guess what you have been saying about me—the things at which you hinted one evening in my hearing, the things that lurk beneath your every lying word. . . . We daren't any longer look at one another . . . and now, of all times, when he feels threatened by what, at any moment, may emerge into the light of day—because, have no doubt of it, your crime *will* be discovered. Murderers always are discovered. . . .!"

Gradère took her by the arm and shook her:

"Shut up! Someone'll hear. . . . Anyhow, what of it? Didn't I act perfectly legitimately in self-defence? You fool! Do you really think that the only crimes are the ones you read of in the newspapers? Have you any idea of the number of murderers that go unpunished? I have. There are many more fish in the sea than ever get into the snares and the nets set by the police. You've no

idea how many there are (myriads of 'em!) darting about in the depths, out of all danger of being caught."

She was not listening to him, though she still stood by the door, clutching her old purple dressing gown about her heavy, handsome body. There was a fixed stare in her eyes. She shook her head and stammered:

"I didn't want . . . I didn't want . . . I can't understand how . . . and with no one to help me . . . no one. . . ."

"No one to help you?"

In gentler mood he looked at her now with an expression of mournful irony.

"No one to help you?" he said again: "How blind you are!"

She thought that he was speaking of himself, and protested that she wanted no more connivance between them, that she repulsed with loathing everything he was suggesting, that her only feeling for him was one of horror. Perhaps she hoped that he would strike her. But he said, in the same calm tone, that it was of somebody else he was thinking:

"You would do well to remember the text which says—'In the midst of you is someone whom you wot not of. . . .' You seem to forget that I was brought up in a seminary. Here, in Liogeats, is someone whom you wot not of. Go and look for him. You have my full permission to tell him everything, see?—even what happened last night."

She felt sure that his mind must be wandering. But when, in a colourless voice, he mentioned the name of the Abbé Forcas, she looked uneasy.

"It's a very bad sign," she said, "if *you've* begun to like *him*!"

"Fool!" he muttered between his teeth, then, on a sudden, burst out furiously:

"You're right, *don't* go! I don't know what I can have been thinking of! He's the laughing-stock of the place, bent double under a load of ridicule and shame. He's a coward: they spit at

him and he says nothing. They could lead him to the slaughter-house and not a bleat would he utter! They lay upon him all the filthy acts of their own secret lives, and he consents to carry the load. Even if he is tempted to answer back that *he's* not the one who is guilty, he, a mere rag of a man, a poor butt at whom everyone laughs, he doesn't yield, but prefers to say nothing. Alone in his church he mutters his prayers—and his good parishioners, you among 'em, flee from him and despise him. His very superiors are filled with suspicion because he is an object of scandal. . . . What's that?"—he passed his hand over his eyes in a bewildered fashion—"what's that you said?"

But he saw that Mathilde had left the room.

XVII

ON Thursday evening the train was very late. It was almost ten o'clock when, at last, Desbats heard the long expected puffing, the sharp hiss of escaping steam. There was a scream of wheels coming to a stop on the rails. In twenty minutes' time Aline would mount the steps. In an hour all would be over. Did Gradère suspect anything? According to Catherine no one ever saw him now, except at meals. But he was not the man to let the noose be drawn round his neck without putting up a fight. Once he realized that he had lost, there was no knowing what he might not do.

The old man was trembling with fear. We believe that when we have planned something carefully enough it will turn out exactly as we intended: but only too often it shows a strange and hostile face, so that we do not recognize it. . . . Gradère would be caught in his sleep. All that instinct of divination which is bred in such men by necessity would go for nothing.

Desbats went to the window and drew the curtain aside. But the outside shutters were closed, and the effort to shift them was too much for him. He opened the door and went on to the landing, which was dimly lit by the hanging lamp in the hall, descended the stairs a little way, and leaned over the banisters. He saw Andrès sitting by the table on which some magazines lay in a pile, his arms crossed on the open page of one of them, his face hidden in his hands.

He went back to his armchair. His breath came gaspingly, not because of the movement he had just made, but because of his terror of what was yet to come. Steps sounded outside the front-door, and he thought he should die of fright. He scrambled to his feet once again and stood leaning against the back of the chair.

Catherine came in. She was alone.

"There was no one at the station," she said, taking off her coat.

"Are you sure you looked everywhere? The old drunkard may have been at the bottle. She may have fallen asleep. . . ."

Catherine assured him that she had looked into every carriage. The Firsts and Seconds had been completely empty.

Desbats breathed again. The fateful moment had receded: nothing would happen to-night. His courage returned.

"She must be ill—that's the obvious explanation. . . . But I'm surprised she didn't send a wire. She may have thought it would be unwise. With a woman like that one can never be sure. Don't you agree, my dear?"

He noticed that Catherine was looking sullen and thoughtful. Suddenly he burst out with:

"You know something!"

She made a gesture of denial, but without much conviction. He pressed her to speak.

"Don't fuss, don't get into a state," she muttered. . . . "Promise me you'll be sensible and not excite yourself. . . ."

She could no longer conceal her anxiety.

"All right, then, I'll tell you. . . . The train was very late and I got talking with several people who had come down for papers . . . in particular, with Mademoiselle Pibeste from the post-office."

She paused. She could hear her father's wheezing breath. She ought to have screwed herself up to say nothing . . . but now she had started, the sooner she got it over and done with the better.

"I happened to say something about telephone calls from Paris, and she remarked that she didn't often have occasion. . . ."

Symphorien had guessed. By the time she went on he had taken the full force of the blow.

"Nobody rang me up from Paris last Monday. I was speaking to the Lugdunos exchange."

For some moments the old man could say nothing. He murmured—"But the voice . . . the hoarse voice. . . ." Catherine shrugged her shoulders. Had he forgotten that Andrès had once told them, speaking of his father, that he could mimic all of them to perfection—that it was really "killing"?

"But . . . but . . . you mean she may have arrived on Monday night? . . . That's nonsense. . . . He probably sent her a wire from Lugdunos telling her not to come—signed with my name. . . ."

"That's certainly a possibility," Catherine replied. But he saw that she did not believe what she was saying. She half opened the door. A faint sound was coming from the ground floor.

"It's Andrès: he's filling cartridges"—she muttered. "We'd better keep a careful watch on him, too. I said as much to mamma this evening, and do you know what her answer was?—that he was avoiding her, that she had only to go into a room where he was for him to leave it. . . ."

"Your mother . . ." Desbats broke in.

"I know all about my mother! She's the one who gave the show away. That'll teach you," said Catherine in a furious voice.

There was a long silence, at the end of which she added, more quietly:

"On Monday night and in the early hours of Tuesday morning she was in Gradère's room. Her excuse was that she was nursing him. He was ill—or so she told me, and I must admit that, so far as I could see from the landing, he did look very flushed and feverish. I had to go and fetch the cupping-glasses."

"If he had gone out after dinner, would you have heard him?"

"Not necessarily. . . . Remember, we had let ourselves get rather slack that evening. . . . I was so glad not to have to go to the station through that awful downpour."

The old man put a question: "What's your own private opinion?"

She made a vague, outward gesture with her hands, but said nothing.

"If that woman really did get here on Monday evening, according to plan . . ."

Symphorien Desbats broke off, trying to read the expression on his daughter's face. The silence of the winter's night wrapped them round. Catherine wanted to help her father into bed as she always did, but he would not let her. He refused to lie down, and seemed as panicky as a child. Indeed, when next he spoke it was in an almost childish whimper:

"Someone's coming upstairs."

Catherine was in a mood to grumble:

"How nervy you are! . . ."

She set the door ajar.

"It's mamma going to bed. . . . No, I was wrong, she's coming in here."

"I must be ready for her," muttered Symphorien.

As she came into the room, they both remained silent, astonished by what they saw. The familiar face was like a stranger's. The eyes were those of a sleep-walker and there were patches of

bilious pallor on the cheeks. Her hair was half down, and a pin slipped from it on to the floor.

"Catherine dear, you *must* find some excuse to sit with Andrès for a bit. Try to make him talk—if necessary, say something that will annoy him and put him in a temper. This mulish silence of his is getting on my nerves."

"Stay with him yourself, and leave Catherine be!" Desbats broke out. "I suppose there's no need for anyone to stay with *me*! I'm threatened as much as anybody else—as you ought to know, none better—you . . . you . . . fraud!"

He had half risen from his chair, his hands gripping the arms. Then he let himself fall back.

Mathilde seemed not to have heard him. She was still pleading with her daughter:

"Do please go, dear, and look after Andrès. I'll take your place with your father. . . ."

"No! No!" screamed the old man. "I know how it is, you want to hand me over to . . ."

The words poured from his lips in a confusion of rage and terror. Catherine hesitated, then moved towards the door.

"I shall never again know any peace of mind," she said at length, to her mother, "after what you've done. Who'd ever have thought that you would side with *that* man! . . ."

"But, Catherine, he's Andrès' father. . . ."

"What of it? . . . We only meant to get him out of the house, didn't we? . . . That would have put an end to the whole business, and Andrès would have been the gainer. . . ."

"There's a great deal you don't know, my dear," said Mathilde in a determined voice. "It wasn't *only* that . . . They wanted to do for him . . . that creature would have handed him over. . . . I dreaded the scandal for Andrès' sake. . . . I thought I was doing only my duty. I didn't know that, by acting as I did, I was exposing him to a still worse danger. . . . I thought that if I warned him

he would clear out, that we should be quit of him, that he would manage to hide somewhere. . . . I couldn't foresee . . ."

She was suddenly aware of two faces turned towards her, of two pairs of eyes fastened on her lips, of two people waiting on tenterhooks for what she was about to reveal. She passed a hand over her forehead:

"No, really, I don't know a thing—no more than you do. . . . That's the truth, I swear it. I'm just frightened. I've got an idea. . . ."

She dropped into a chair. The others waited for her to continue . . . but she sat on in a stupor, barely noticing that Catherine was deep in a whispered argument with her father.

"You gave me your word that all you cared about was getting him out of the house."

"How was I to know what that woman planned to do with him? It was no concern of mine: it didn't interest me. . . ."

"Anything that has to do with Andrès is a matter of concern to us. . . ."

"Speak for yourself, you little fool!"

Catherine turned to her mother and, raising her voice, said:

"All right, mamma: you stay here while I go and see what's happening downstairs."

"I forbid you to leave me alone," shouted her father, but she pretended not to hear. She hurried down, lit the hanging lamp in the hall, crossed the dining-room, the door of which had remained open, and went into the small room which was always jokingly referred to in the Du Buch family as "the Arsenal," because the sporting guns and ammunition were kept there.

Hanging on racks against the wall were guns of every kind, ranging from the old "muzzle-loader" with which the elder Gradère had never missed a woodcock, to Grandpapa Du Buch's Lefauchaux, and the latest pattern of "hammerless." . . . Seated

at the deal table, Andrès was busy filling cartridge-cases with powder and shot. He glanced up at the sound of somebody entering the room, but made no further sign of interest. His face looked drawn: his mouth was tight shut, and his eyes had a withdrawn expression—the kind of expression that one sees in animals when they are off their feed.

"The wind's gone round since this morning," said Catherine. "We can go out after woodcock to-morrow. . . . Make me up some cartridges, will you?"

He glanced at the great standing press, the doors of which were open.

"There's more than enough here," he said in apathetic tones.

"Of course, if it'll be a bore for you having me come along. . . ."

He shrugged his shoulders:

"I don't give a damn whether you come or don't," he growled.

Not a muscle of her face moved. He had interrupted what he was doing, and sat there playing with an empty cartridge-case. In a sudden burst of ill-temper he said:

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I put up with a lot of things, Andrès, and I don't suppose I've always been a very pleasant sort of person. . . . It's my duty to put up with a lot of things. . . ."

"All of us. . . ."

"But what I can't put up with is seeing you suffer. . . ."

She began to cry. She looked, suddenly, like the skinny little girl he had been so fond of teasing in the old days. He had forgotten she could look like that, so accustomed had he grown to her sullen or her mocking moods. He tried to find something to say, and she realized with amazement that he was not going to snub her.

"Don't make yourself miserable on my account," he brought out at last. "Nothing matters to me any more."

Then, probably for the first time in all the years they had lived together in the same house, she heard him enunciate a criticism of life.

"Everything's foul—don't you agree?"

Was it only the woman he loved of whom he was thinking? He should feel some concern, too, for his wretched father. He must have had a terrible shock, thought Catherine, but what had happened to make him avoid Tamati as he was doing?

He broke his silence to say: "But when there's nothing left—are you afraid of death, Catherine?"

"For myself—no: for others—yes."

Suddenly she sat down by him and put her arm in his.

"No! Andrès, no! . . . Promise me. . . . Swear to me. . . ."—her voice was urgent.

He was surprised by her eagerness, surprised and somewhat upset. . . . He did not repel her. It came over him that, when all was said and done, she was a woman. Some instinct made her remove her arm. She went across and leaned against the wall at the other side of the table on which Andrès had now put his elbows, and was sitting with his head in his hands. Behind him the barrels of the shot-guns gave off a faint gleam. There was a pervading smell of grease.

"I want to ask you to forgive me," said the girl at last. "I've been wicked and odious . . . yes, I have . . . but you must make an effort to understand my feelings. You see, the way you and my mother have always treated me, as though I really didn't exist at all, was more than I could bear. . . . You'll never know. . . . But that's all over now, as you'll see. Everything I have, everything I ever shall have, is for you only. . . ."

The face he raised to hers showed complete bewilderment. He protested that he didn't care two hoots about what she had or what she would have. . . . Everyone believed that was all he ever thought about, that he was like the rest of them and cared for

nothing but the land. His father knew to his cost how little he really bothered about it. . . .

"It's only natural that I should feel attached to the place. No one else knows every inch of it as I do. I've surveyed all the boundaries, and none of the neighbours dare alter them so long as I'm around. I know the farmers too and they know me. I'm far from being their enemy. Like them I know what it is to work for others. Fundamentally there is no difference between them and me. . . . But as for the pleasure of saying to myself—'that's *mine*' . . . you'd be surprised, my poor child, if you really knew how little I care. . . . I've got other things to bother about. . . ."

"Other things?" said Catherine—and the old, ill-natured note had come back into her voice. "What you mean is another person. But I'm not blaming you," she hurriedly added. "You see, I understand that, too."

He shrugged, and the gesture expressed weariness. "You're on quite the wrong tack. If I were carefree enough to think about . . . that person, I shouldn't be complaining like this, because in that case I shouldn't feel that I'd lost anything . . ." (he hesitated, seeming to fumble for his words). "How can I explain what I mean? There have been times when unhappiness of quite a different kind has floored me . . . there have been times when a certain kind of pain can actually seem like pleasure. I won't pretend that I haven't suffered abominably because of her . . . forgive me for being so frank. . . ."

"There's nothing to forgive," she said quietly. "It's all perfectly simple. You're not telling me anything I didn't know already. . . ."

He went on:

"But something else has come between me and my suffering—that particular suffering. . . ."

On a sudden impulse he got up and took her arm: "You're

mixed up in all this business, Catherine. Tell me, what's going on in this house?"

The question threw her into confusion, and she made no answer.

"You see: you can't deny it. . . ."

Then, in almost the identical terms that old Desbats had used a while back, "You know something," he said: "tell me what you know."

Little used though he was to reading facial expression, he saw in the eyes before him, for all her effort to conceal it, a look of compassion that brought him up short.

"You won't tell me?"

But he did not press his question, perhaps he was terrified of what her answer might be. He sat down again at the table and began to play with the empty cartridge-cases. Standing at a little distance, Catherine followed with her eyes the movements of his powerful hands.

Suddenly, he started to speak again:

"You've realized what he means to me—haven't you? You hate and despise him, but I loved him, in spite of all of you. I used to think of his life of love and happiness, which is so different from our lives. Everything that *your* father hoards, he has squandered on pleasure. You'll probably think me mad when I tell you that I looked on my father as a younger brother. He has stripped me of everything, but if I had more I would willingly give it to him. . . . It's not that I'm good, but simply that I believed him when he said that he would repay me a hundredfold. I had come to rely on him. I knew that only by learning the lessons he has taught me could I ever hope to be loved, could I ever hope to be more than a miserable worm. I believed that he was fond of me . . . and not selfishly, like Tamati . . . that he wanted my happiness. . . . I tell you all this, and probably I don't make myself at all plain . . . I always knew he had been a bad lot . . . and I admired him for it."

A bad lot? Yes, a man who had spent his whole life in love-affairs . . . in unimaginable orgies . . . well, for an unlicked cub like me, that at least . . .”

Catherine was holding her breath, fearing to interrupt him. She kept her eyes averted.

“But there were certain words that I understood only too well, insults muttered by Uncle Symphorien . . . certain allusions. I buried them deep inside me, I wouldn’t let myself think of them. All the same, I realized clearly enough what people in Liogeats were saying about him. . . . And then, quite suddenly the other evening, when he said something to me so extraordinary that you couldn’t even imagine what it was, so extraordinary that I didn’t really understand what he meant . . . quite suddenly I found myself seeing and hearing a man whom I didn’t know, a man in whose existence I didn’t believe. In a flash, I saw him with your eyes, with the eyes of everyone in this house. What a revelation! From that moment, everything that I had so wilfully ignored, deliberately refused to see, became crystal-clear and full of meaning. . . . I’ve become like a dog who snuffs the ground and is terrified of the scent he picks up. We’re all in this thing together—only, I’m the one person who is playing his part in the dark.”

She came close and, with her arms round his neck, gently stroked his hair, as she might have done to calm a frightened animal. So little did he attempt to resist her, that now, when he was at the very peak of suffering, she felt for the first time a woman’s joy, a mysterious feeling of uneasy peace. She grew more daring, and pressed the great curly head against her shoulder.

“Much sadness may come because of him,” she said in a low voice. “It will come, but it will pass:”—there was an ardent, odd, eagerness in her tone: “because you will lay your head on my breast and find a hiding-place within my arms.”

He freed himself, but quite gently.

"I don't love you, Catherine," he said: "I never could love you as you want to be loved."

She did not move, but stood there with her eyes closed and her arm bent as though it were still about his neck. She was waiting until she should feel strong enough to answer him calmly:

"I know that, but it doesn't matter so long as I am here to watch over you."

He was not listening to her now, but gazing into the distance. Suddenly, he asked her a question:

"Have you ever thought that he might be mad? . . . My father, I mean. . . . He behaves so extravagantly at times."

Catherine dared not ask—"How do you mean? What does he do?" She would have liked to change the subject, but Andrès had become unusually talkative:

"I can only make you understand if I first confess something. . . . I realize now how idiotic it was, but I *did* mean to disappear. . . . No, let me go on . . . it'll probably give you a good laugh! To cut a long story short, I planned to make myself ill . . . you know how easily I do get ill. I had pleurisy once, like my father, and at the same age. Don't you remember that Clairac wanted to send me to hospital? . . . Well, the other night, when it was raining cats and dogs—please don't laugh—the idea came to me that I would stay out in the downpour as long as possible with nothing on but a shirt. I did it two nights running. It was horrible. Then I came in, and went out on the balcony. The only result was a cold in the head, so I gave up the whole silly scheme. Next time I want . . ."

"You won't want anything of the sort ever again, promise me you won't, Andrès?"

He ignored this appeal, and went on playing with the cartridges scattered over the table.

"Well, you won't believe it, but I saw my father go out each

of those nights—or at least the ones I spent on the balcony. The rain was terrific—you remember how awful the weather was? . . . It was Saturday—no, Sunday and Monday . . . I heard him go out by the back door into the yard. . . .”

“But you didn’t see him? You couldn’t have seen him. You couldn’t have known it actually *was* he.”

She spoke without emphasis. He did not notice that the colour had drained from her cheeks, or the odd way in which she was leaning against the wall.

“I know that, but I recognized his step. . . . Besides, who else would have been likely to leave the house at that time of night? . . . I went along and knocked at his door, but there was no answer. And I heard him come back through all that rain. Next morning he must have gone out again and stayed away all day—because he got home about midnight. What a running to and fro there was. . . . You went past my door twice. . . .”

“Yes, he was ill, and in no state to put his nose out of doors. . . . I swear that’s true.”

“He had better luck than I had, and didn’t get drenched for nothing. . . . Don’t you think he *must* be mad to go running about the countryside in weather like that? It’s easy to guess there was a woman in the case. But if he had wanted to meet her, he surely could have chosen some more convenient moment. . . . I suppose the truth is that he goes dashing about all night in Paris, and sleeps during the day, and couldn’t resist the temptation to do the same sort of thing in Liogeats. . . . What’s wrong, Catherine?”

She had fallen into a chair and sat there rigid.

“It wasn’t him, Andrès,” she stammered: “you *mustn’t* have seen him, you *didn’t* see him. You heard no one leave the house on those two nights. Promise me you didn’t. . . .”

All of a sudden her white little face fell sideways on to her right shoulder.

“Catherine! . . . What’s the matter?”

He took her in his arms, and laid her on an old broken-down divan on which they had been accustomed to have wrestling matches when they were children. Almost at once she opened her eyes, and fixed them on Andrès who was kneeling beside her, holding her hand.

"Swear to me that what you heard, and what you saw shall remain a secret between us!"

She sat up, listening intently. A clamour of angry voices had broken out on the bedroom floor.

"Don't go," she begged: "don't, Andrès!"

But he pushed her aside, and took the stairs two at a time. Old Desbats, in a dressing gown, was leaning against the landing wall, fighting for breath. Gradère, his hands in his pockets, was chuckling and shrugging his shoulders, while Mathilde, in a white heat of fury, was saying:

"You slipped into my husband's room with the object of frightening him, of making him ill with fright . . . and when I say, make ill . . . what a vile creature you are!"

He tried to drown her voice:

"Why so indignant, my dear? Why all this play-acting?"

"Look out!" cried Catherine: "Andrès is there!"

Mathilde, clutching her old purple wrap about her, turned towards the young man a face puffy with crying. He hung back slightly, standing on one of the treads of the staircase, leaning on the banisters.

"I can't help that," she moaned: "he's got to know sooner or later, he's got to understand . . ."

Catherine cut her short:

"Why did you leave papa? . . . I begged you not to leave him alone."

"He sent me out of the room, Catherine; he wouldn't have me there. Fortunately, I didn't go back to bed. . . ."

At last old Desbats managed to find his voice:

"How do I know you didn't let him in? . . . Haven't you played traitor once already? . . . You're accessory to whatever it was that happened the other night . . . you're on his side . . . on the murderer's side!"

Catherine's strident tones rang out again:

"Can't you see that Andrès is there?"

The altercation stopped suddenly. Every eye was fixed on Andrès, who was still clinging motionless to the banisters, and breathing hard, like a bull when, with the sword in his flank, he trembles on his legs but does not fall. Only Gradère kept his back to him.

The boy went up to his father and touched him on the shoulder:

"Are you deaf? Didn't you hear the name he called you?"

"Just one of his usual kindly compliments! You ought to know him by this time, my dear fellow. If he really thinks I am . . . what he called me just now, let him prove it, let him accuse me in front of you."

Everyone present felt the contrast between his words and the sombre, despairing tone in which they were uttered. And now, he, too, relapsed into silence. There were five of them on the landing, in the middle of the night, all of them more or less within sight of the truth, which only Gradère knew in its entirety. The wretched man stood there, petrified, a fixed glare in his eyes, nor did he seem to notice that each of the others was stealthily edging away. He did not hear the sound of bolts being shot. All of a sudden he gave a start. He was alone with Andrès.

"Go to bed, papa; you're feverish."

"You're right," the other replied: "I've caught a chill. I didn't think it was anything much, but recently my temperature has been going up in the evenings."

Andrès accompanied him as far as his room, and asked him, point blank, whether he might come in for a few moments.

"I'm not well, and I'm dog-tired."

Gradère spoke in a low voice. He seemed to be pleading for a respite:

"Come and see me to-morrow morning."

"I won't stay more than a few seconds, father, and then I'll let you get some sleep."

He followed Gradère into the room and shut the door. He glanced round him:

"This is mamma's room . . . I never saw her here . . . I remember her only in Bilbao and Paris. . . . Where were you when we were living in Spain?"

Gradère replied that business had kept him in France. He felt much relieved at the turn the conversation was taking.

"Your mother, my boy . . . only a few days ago, someone, a priest—wrote to me that she was a saint and a martyr. . . ."

"Why a martyr?"

Disconcerted by the question, his father answered, in his least pleasant voice, that curés always exaggerate. He gave a malicious chuckle, shrugged his shoulders, and said with sudden heat:

"Now be off with you—I'm all in!"

"Not till I know what Uncle Symphorien meant . . ."

"You heard what he said, didn't you?" replied Gradère in bored tones. "I went to his room to talk about Cernes and Bali-saou. . . . You'll admit, I suppose, that I had a perfect right to do so? But he managed to persuade Tamati that I wanted to frighten the life out of him. . . . They're either mad or lying!"

"I know all about that, papa. But the old man cried out to Tamati that she was an accessory in what happened the other night. . . ."

Gradère was still standing, his hand on the latch. "I didn't hear that," he said at length: "you must have dreamed it."

He sauntered over to his son, his hands in his pockets.

"You know me pretty well, don't you, my boy? I don't pretend

that I've lived a particularly edifying life . . . a bad lot, yes . . . but there's a whale of a difference between being a bad lot and wanting to do that old rascal in. . . Besides, who ever heard of anyone dying from fright? It's childish!"

Andrès drew a deep breath. The man standing there before him was no different from other men. The rest of them must be suffering from morbid imagination, and he had caught the infection.

"But you did say some pretty awful things, papa . . . the other evening . . . about Tamati."

"If all my little jokes are going to be taken seriously! Irony is not the strong point of you people at Liogeats."

He was lolling on the sofa, looking up at Andrès:

"In Paris one can say anything—no matter how extravagant. It just goes in at one ear and out at the other. People there have got a sense of proportion. Here one's got to be answerable for the tiniest joke—it really is a bit too much! You don't understand what a joke is. That's why it is so impossible for a Parisian to live in the country! . . ."

"You ought to have put up a better defence: perhaps you realize now what they've got into their heads!"

Andrès was smiling, no longer tense. Gradère, too, was breathing more freely. He was once more master of the situation. He must be careful not to let them work the boy into a state a second time. The difficulty was to arrange things so that he should hear what was said without believing what he heard. The game must be played out to the end.

"Old Desbats really is the limit! It's appalling what ideas a mixture of stupidity, hatred and fright can inject into a sick man's brain! You'd scarcely credit all the talk of thieving that's going round at my expense! The comic part of the business is that the whole thing started with a dirty trick the old man played on me. I'll tell you all about it, and you can judge for yourself."

By this time he was talking fluently, relying on his gift for improvisation, and on the effect which his attitude of indulgent mockery always had on Andrès.

"I'm not exactly an angel, you know, and the old man has got on the tracks of some woman with whom I used to raise Cain in the days of my youth. She's got some letters of mine . . . let's leave it at that! From the purely erotic point of view, they're worth their weight in gold! Would you believe it, in order to get me out of here, they've turned to this old bitch. . . . That nasty piece of work down the corridor actually decided to pay her ticket to Liogeats. . . ."

But who, asked Andrès, had let the cat out of the bag? Gradère hesitated a moment, and then said that it had been Tamati.

"She's very fond of me, you know."

He had forgotten that only a short while ago she had been blackguarding him in Andrès' hearing. The boy, however, had not forgotten, but he said nothing.

"Well, old man, when the bitch didn't turn up on the day they were expecting her, he got it firmly fixed in his head . . . well, the long and the short of it is . . . he thinks I've rubbed her out!"

Andrès' silence suddenly made him feel frightened. He was uneasy, and realized, at the same moment, that the boy saw that he was uneasy. He decided to brazen things out, with the result that he went rather too far. He saw that he had said more than was necessary, but lacked the presence of mind to pull up in time.

"But they were out of luck. . . . You see, according to their reckoning, it all ought to have happened on Monday night—but on that particular night it so happened that I was safely tucked up in bed."

In a low voice, Andrès repeated the words—"Monday night. . . ."

"Tamati can vouch for what I'm telling you. She spent part of the night looking after me. . . ."

Obviously he had blundered. Once more a sort of fog had settled down between them. The boy kept from looking at him, but Gradère knew very well what the expression in his eyes would have been if he had let him see them. In that midnight silence neither father nor son could find a word to say. Andrès moved towards the door, his shoulders hunched, and this time it was Gabriel who would gladly have kept him there could they only have chatted about indifferent subjects. He called to him to come back, but in vain. The boy did not so much as turn his head.

Andrès did not go back to his room. Instead, he went downstairs and lit the hanging lamp in the hall. He gave a faint gasp. Catherine was still there.

All he said to her was:

"Not gone to bed yet?"

But he did not repel her. The load he carried was too heavy. At that moment of his destiny he would have clung to anybody, and because Catherine happened to be there, it was on her that he threw himself with a moan. She scarcely moved at all under the impact of his body. The frail slip of a girl supported the full weight of the young and stricken oak that smothered her with all its rain-drenched leaves. She took to herself part of his terrible grief. That, at least, they could share. Because together they had broken this loaf of sour bread, they would, from now on, have everything in common. They mingled their tears. But, while he, with all the strength of his being, longed for death, she, with eyes closed, and her face pressed to his body, like a baby at the breast, drank, for the first time, that hot and feverish draught, drawing life and nourishment from the broken and defeated man at her side.

XVIII

THE next day was the first Friday in December. As soon as Mass was over young Lassus crossed the Choir, opened the door of the Sacristy, and saw, at once, that the curé's Act of Grace would last too long to permit of his having a word with him before school. He walked away, therefore, and Mathilde, who had been present during the service, listened to the sound of his small clogs retreating into the distance. She waited there, alone in the church, until the Abbé Forcas should return.

She uttered no prayer, for she was conscious of an emptiness within her, and felt hopelessly abandoned. Any appeal from her would wander aimlessly about the lime-washed vaulting, and before the altar with its load of tarnished gilt vases filled with artificial flowers. . . . But she did not care. . . . It was a man of whom she had come in quest, a man who would, perhaps, listen to what she had to say, would try to understand, would tell her what she ought to do. For her there was no choice—she must obey. As a human being he was young, but he was a priest. The question whether he was strong enough to carry the load she was about to lay on him did not arise. Of him she could demand anything, because he was a priest, and when a man is a priest we may soil his spirit with any abomination, no matter how gross, may darken his heart with any secret, no matter how foul.

What could he be doing? She heard the heavy ticking of the clock, the crowing of a distant cock, the sawmill's scream. Outside these walls was the life of the world. It seemed to her that the church was like a dead heart within a living body. To pass the time, she went over in her mind what it was that she had come to say. She would present the matter, insofar as it concerned her—

self, in the best possible light. Very rarely is a woman's confession an act of accusation. . . .

She had been waiting for nearly half-an-hour. Could it be that he had left without noticing her? She felt surprised that no sounds at all—no cough, no scrape of a chair, no closing of a cupboard—reached her ears. Impatiently, she rose from her knees, deliberately advanced into the Choir, made a brief and perfunctory genuflection, pushed open the Sacristy door—and stopped dead.

There was nothing very strange about what she saw, nothing but a young priest on his knees after Mass. His head was inclined slightly towards the left, his eyes were closed, his hands resting on one of those backless stools designed to keep choirboys from lolling. The room was untidy because young Lassus had not been able to put back in their places the cruets, the alb and the chasuble. No, the scene was nothing at all out of the ordinary. Nevertheless, Mathilde had a feeling that she ought to go away, that she was prying into a secret. The humblest objects in this little country Sacristy—the cruets, the metal platter, the old wash-basin and tap fixed to the wall—seemed to stand out in a light that was not of this world, a light of which this rigid, motionless man was the source. It was as though a dog's distant barking, the drone of the sawmill waxing and waning with the breeze, reached her from another planet.

She heard a sigh, stepped backwards without shutting the door, and returned to her chair.

As soon as school was over, young Lassus ran to the church. A low mutter, first of one voice, then of another, warned him that the curé was taking confession. A glance at the penitent's shoes, visible beneath the rep curtain, led the boy to conclude that they belonged to the lady from the great house, who had been present during Mass. She had come back. How pleased the curé would be!

She showed no sign of leaving the confessional, and young

Lassus began tidying up the Sacristy. When he had finished there, he went back into the church. The lady was still there. What a lot of sins she must have to confess! If he went close, he might hear! But he kept as far from the confessional as he could, sat down before the altar of the Virgin, and brought from his pocket a much-knotted rosary which it took him a long time to disentangle. From his far vantage-point he watched the shoes under the rep curtain. Every few moments, one of them moved, fidgeted slightly, and then became still. Eleven o'clock struck. His aunt would be getting anxious. He made a genuflection, smiled at the Virgin, gave one last hurried squint at the lady's shoes, and left the church with a loud clatter of clogs.

XIX

WHEN Mathilde reached home, she found the house more silent than it had ever been. The events of the previous night, when all the sufferers under this roof had met, suddenly, on the very brink of a truth which all of them believed was at last to be revealed, had had no after-effects. Each one of these human entities had recoiled from the light and gone to ground in their several secrecies, there to await whatever it was that might eventually take on form and substance. Catherine and her mother had merely changed places. The young girl now filled in *Andrès'* life the place till then occupied by Mathilde, while the latter had replaced Catherine with old *Desbats*, who was in a terrible state of nerves because he had been responsible for getting *Aline* there and might be involved in the subsequent unpleasantness.

To such an extent did *Gradère* feel himself to be excluded from the family circle, that he could not get over the feeling that his physical presence at the chateau of *Liogeats* had ceased to have

the slightest importance. He was free to go or stay. He had been "suppressed," and lived on now like a diseased pine-tree which has been isolated from its fellows by a ditch so that it may be prevented from spreading infection, and left to die alone. Never again would he feel Andrès' eyes upon him, unskilled though the boy was in keeping them averted. Of his own accord he had taken to absenting himself from the family meals. He used his quarrel with Desbats as an excuse to board at Lacote's. He still slept at the chateau, but returned to it each evening only when he was sure that its inhabitants would be safely in their rooms.

It was now winter. Andrès, who was forever out after woodcock and hares, made longer expeditions for duck into the Teychoueyres marshes whenever the nights were suitable. He did not object to Catherine going with him. He could hardly have borne to be alone. Although they never spoke of what was in both their minds, he could not have endured the companionship of a woman ignorant of the nature of his torment. Catherine knew: like him, Catherine was waiting. Side by side they bent over the papers (never had there been so many papers at Liogeats), their heads touching. They turned at once to the paragraphs of miscellaneous news, glanced hurriedly through them, then read them all again from the beginning.

The young girl gave expression to nothing that might have been taken for emotion. Her sole concern was to look after Andrès' material comfort, to surround him with a constant atmosphere of discreet protection. On fine Sundays he broke away from her and played practice games of football with his friends in preparation for the spring matches. Whenever he had some definite job to do—a sale to discuss, a farm to visit—she let him go alone, and it was he who, on his return after dark, called out, as soon as he got into the hall,—“Where are you, Catherine?” When that happened, she came at once to his summons. He found nothing strange in seeing her kneel down, as Tamati had

done in the past, to take off his shooting-boots. If his trapper's coat had not kept him dry, she made him change his shirt. She had unquestioned access to his bedroom.

All this Mathilde noticed, and said nothing. As the winter months passed, Catherine relaxed her attitude of watchfulness. One afternoon, Andrès was riding alone along the Balisaou road. As he passed the spot known as "The Rock," he noticed a man sitting in the sunlight on the brink of an abandoned gravel-pit. He reined in his horse and saw that the man was his father, and that he seemed to be busy writing on his knee. Turning round, he regained the main road.

This is what the man was writing.

"What purpose can be served by my telling you about the 'event'? I have no doubt that Mathilde has made full use of the permission I gave her, and that by this time you know as much as she does. Of all the actions of my life it was the least criminal, because it was so wholly in tune with my nature. . . . Nevertheless, as I see it (strange though it may seem) it remains the one thing I have done that is utterly unpardonable. Nothing else weighs a straw in the scale against that murder. I know perfectly well how a man of your cloth would explain this conviction of mine. The fouler the victim, you would say, the more irreparable the gesture that sent her to her death. I once knew an old priest at Luchon (I told you something else he said, do you remember?) who made use of that theory as an argument against the death-penalty. Have I destroyed Aline's last hope of salvation? Was I merely an instrument in the hand of your God for the meting out of His justice? . . . Sheer lunacy, dear reverend sir! . . . As you see, I read your mind with perfect ease. . . . But fortunately, there is no presence here, none at all, except that of a decomposing corpse within a few feet of me. . . . I am writing this on my knee, sitting in the gravel-pit where, forty years ago, the little Du Buch girls and the little Gradère boy had such happy times.

"The sun has gone in and it is cold. Ever since I was compelled to spend two nights in this spot, I have been coughing badly. I am telling you all this because there is no one else to tell. I can no longer breathe the same air as the others. I try in vain to catch Andrès' eye. Andrès has pronounced judgment against me. I have lost him, and it was my own silly fault. I, who know so well how to deal with cunning, am like wax in the hands of young innocence. Now that I have lost him for ever, nothing matters any longer. In the presence of such simplicity, one is powerless. If he ever read a book, if he ever dabbled in ideas, he would have 'romanticized' the situation, would, perhaps, have developed a sense of duty towards me. . . . But what can one expect of a dear, brainless creature like that? His reactions are those of the man who shouts 'String him up!' when he sees a condemned criminal on his way to the gallows.

"Nothing has come out yet, or, at least, not in the papers. When will they make up their minds? I can't wait much longer. If they go on saying nothing, I shall summon a family-council and start the ball rolling. I have often imagined the scene. It will be staged in old Desbat's bedroom. I shall tell them that I acted in self-defence, that I had no choice, that it wasn't I who brought the woman to Liogeats, that, in any case, somebody had to be a victim, so that I merely got in first. I know I could have run away as Mathilde wanted me to do. But that was only pretence on her part: actually, she was utterly dependent on me. Put baldly, she expected to find her happiness in me. Did anyone hold me back when I was already walking on the brink of crime? Did anyone so much as make a gesture? On the evening before it happened, I ran after you in the rain. But the look you turned on me had nothing in it of love (and that's putting it mildly!). In a very official, very 'clergyman' voice, you said: 'I am at the disposition of anyone who wishes to speak privately to me.' That's not good enough, my friend. I stretched a hand to you in the darkness, and

you saw fit to ignore it. You behaved as though you did not see it. I am not blaming you, you poor, childlike young man. No matter how warm your answering pressure might have been, it would still have become the hand of a criminal on the night of that Monday-Tuesday. . . . Nothing would have been changed. . . . Still, I do want you to think of me as I really am, without too much horror, because, well, do you remember those branches on your door-step?—it was I who cleared them away, the night I got to Liogeats. . . . (but perhaps you don't know what I am talking about).

“Thank you for writing to me. I tore up the letter—I had to. I deeply regret the necessity, because although there was something slightly official, something rather formal, about it, I should like to be able to re-read it now—to try to understand it. How can I expect you to accept the fact that I believe in the Devil? You think it's just a childish pose on my part, don't you? Besides, he wouldn't want me to believe in him. What does 'loving God' mean? An emotional impulse directed to an entity!—why, the very idea is unthinkable! Loving is an act that involves the flesh. What you are doing, my poor sir, is to transpose: you are guilty of performing, in the jargon of the day, a 'transference.' . . . You—but what's the point in my going on? I know what you will say before you say it . . . you have put your finger into the print of the nails and thrust your hand into His side; your head has been laid upon His bosom. . . . What I find so curious is that a decent high-minded chap like Andrès should not have the remotest idea of an invisible world, or of that ocean whose tides flow in upon us from all sides and eat away our substance; whereas I, spattered with blood and filth as I am, have a very clear idea of what it is you do each morning in your empty church, of what it is that is accomplished there . . . so clear an idea, in fact, that I can even imagine your sense of inner silence, your feeling of joy. . . .”

Quietly, imperceptibly, the night was advancing into the underbrush. For a few brief moments Gradère wrote on, unable to see what he was writing. He could hear in the pine-tops the whispering of a shower, but it was not the heavy rain which had built a screen about his crime, and he had been listening to the sound for some time before he felt the first drops upon his face. Quite unconscious of the fact that he was imitating Andrès, and with the same intention, he unbuttoned his shirt. The damp evening wind crept under his clothes. The rain began to run over the same skinny chest which, years ago, in the summer holidays, Mathilde had seen glistening with water at the pool above the lock. He felt no fear of the decomposing body nearby. It was not remorse that had drawn him to the Rock, but, perhaps, the horror of being alone. He coughed: he was feverish, and walked with difficulty. As he passed the presbytery he slipped a folded paper beneath the door. He did not much care who read it . . . but the Abbé had no servant. He stopped at Lacote's, drank a Pernod, and got through a bottle of wine with his meal. At the *table d'hôte* three commercial travellers were discussing the advantages and disadvantages of cars in their work. They were soon deep in calculation: "But, look here, you're not taking depreciation into account . . . allowing for petrol at to-day's price . . . of course, wear and tear on tyres is to some extent a matter of luck. . . ." They were all speaking at once with a quite extraordinary vehemence. Gradère, who was, by this time, slightly drunk, listened to every word the men uttered, as though his life depended on the discussion. He wiped his lips, got up, and stuffed his napkin into one of the pigeonholes ranged along the wall.

From the far end of the avenue he could see lights in the chateau windows, the light of lamps shining through the darkness. Had he been a man like other men, he would have hurried towards it. Faces would have been turned to greet him; he would have pushed Andrès' hair back with his hand before stooping to kiss his forehead.

He walked up the front steps with deliberate slowness, making as much noise as possible, so as to give anyone who happened to be in the hall time to get away before he crossed the threshold. The sound of hurried footsteps did, indeed, reach his ears. Someone, however, had remained behind, and appeared to be waiting for him. It was Mathilde, whose air of indifference and placidity seemed to have wiped all meaning from her ravaged face. He pretended not to have seen her, and started to go upstairs: but she called to him:

"Have you seen this?"

She was holding out a copy of a Paris newspaper, the only one he had neglected to read in the course of the last two or three days, and showed him, on the third page, a paragraph printed in reassuringly small type.

"There is still no news of Aline X. . . . the former street-walker, who vanished, on the 25th November, from the private hotel in the rue de la Convention, where she had been living for the past few months. She told the manageress that she would be returning next day, took no luggage with her, and did not leave an address. Nothing has been found in her room to throw any light on her mysterious disappearance, but the police state that they are in possession of clues as a result of which they are concentrating their efforts in a certain direction. Our readers will understand that, for the time being, a high degree of reserve must be maintained. The authorities are anxious to have news of a former man friend of Aline X's who left Paris some weeks prior to her disappearance. It is thought that he may be able to give useful information . . ."

"What an extraordinary thing!" said Gradère. "Here have I been reading every paper I could lay my hands on since . . . well, you know what . . . this one in particular, and the very first time I give it a miss . . ."

Mathilde seemed not to have heard him. She was already moving away, but he called her back, and there was a note of anguish in his voice:

"What ought I to do? . . . Go, I suppose . . . or send the police-magistrate a telegram. . . . I mustn't give the impression that I'm lying low . . . won't you come down again, Mathilde?"

She leaned over the banisters and said:

"I think you're right . . . but it's entirely your affair. The one person who might be able to give you useful advice is the Abbé Forcas. . . ."

She went on upstairs, and he was left alone.

A continuous sound came from the "Arsenal" where Andrès was filling cartridges. Gradère went as far as the door. He was frightened of entering the room, but, at last, plucked up sufficient courage to do so. Catherine was sitting beside Andrès, under a lamp, knitting. With her steel-rimmed spectacles on her nose, she looked like a little old woman. Both of them stopped what they were doing.

"I'm off to-morrow morning by the six o'clock train. I hope to be back by the end of the week."

They got up.

"So long, then"—muttered Andrès, and held out a flabby hand.

Gabriel looked at old Gradère's needle-gun hanging on the wall. Andrès followed the direction of his gaze. Habitually slow though he was at guessing other people's thoughts, he did, perhaps, on this occasion get some inkling of what was going on in his father's mind. Whether that was so or not, Gabriel most certainly had a pretty good idea of what his son was thinking, and, maybe, of what he wanted . . . (he was one of those simple-minded persons, such as are often to be found among soldiers, who think that the obvious thing to do, when a fellow-officer has been stealing or cheating at cards, is to leave a revolver conveniently lying on the table). But perhaps Gradère was just

imagining this. He left the room without turning his head. How surprised he would have been, had he gone back, to find Andrès with his head on Catherine's lap sobbing. . . .

He tip-toed across the dining-room and the hall. The front-door had already been bolted for the night. It was not cold, and there was no frost. But Gradère had neglected to take his overcoat. A patch of sky, light by comparison with the black walls made by the trees, showed him his way. He walked towards the town, where a single light was showing. It came from the Abbé's house. 'He has found my letter. He can't very well *not* be thinking about me.' . . . Should he use the knocker? . . . If he did, a window would be opened on the first floor, and a voice would ask who was there. What reply could he make?—what reason offer for this nocturnal visit which had been suggested by Mathilde? Say that he had come for advice? but he knew very well what advice a man like the Abbé would give: "Hand yourself over to justice, take your punishment, put yourself in the hands of God."

He shivered and sat down on the steps whose worn surface was already familiar to his hands. He touched them as though he were stroking an old face. He coughed, but one of the lessons he had learned in his seminary days was that no one can make himself ill of set intent. At that period of his life, he had committed the wildest imprudences with the sole object of getting the infirmary Sisters to spoil him. But never once had he managed to catch anything, whereas his attack of pleurisy had been the result of one short walk in the rain. . . . Crouching against the door he let his mind wander among the most ordinary thoughts before making his entry on the stage and facing the music. But he did not really believe that he ever would face the music, and that was why he remained calm. He was like a seemingly cornered man who knows that at his back there lies a vast and secret countryside, rich in lines of retreat. Not that he gave serious thought to Andrès' unspoken suggestion (or what he had taken

for such). Nothing would have induced him to clench his teeth on a revolver barrel and pull the trigger, nothing. Somehow or other he *would* get out of the prison of his life, *would* break the line of his destiny, *would* escape from that appalling logic of events, that combination of motives and actions, which, after fifty years, had led him back to the Rock, to the sandy playground of his childhood, one dark night with Aline. . . . His cough sounded strangely in the peacefulness of the winter's night. But at Liogeats what night is ever wholly silent? The lightest breeze is caught by a thousand murmuring pines (as though somewhere there is always a sleeping God): the Balion gives back the sound of an unceasing ripple as it breaks against stones on which a prehistoric ocean has left the mark of shells and membranes. . . .

A window was opened and a voice said: "Who's that coughing?" (What he had been expecting for the last hour had come!) He gave a start, but made no answer. From behind the door came the sound of hurrying steps, first on the stairs, then on the flags of the passage. Gradère had not fainted, nor did he ape unconsciousness. He remained where he was, like an inanimate object, silent, sightless, immobile—a mere stone,—even when the light of a lamp fell upon his face. Two hands seized him under the arms. He could scarcely have stood unaided.

The Abbé opened a door on the left—the door of the kitchen. He made Gradère sit in a wicker armchair, and threw a handful of twigs on the ashes of the fire. He touched his visitor's forehead, then his neck.

"You can't go back to the chateau at this time of night. I'll make you up a bed."

Gradère was alone in the dead kitchen. The fire had already collapsed. On the table beneath the lamp stood some cold boiled potatoes in a soup-plate, an empty tin of sardines, and a hunk of bread.

The Abbé came back. He begged him to wait a little, because

the sheets were still slightly damp. He filled a jug with hot water, and again went out.

"Now . . ." he said.

He helped Gradère to his feet, but the sick man moved quickly and needed no support. There was a smell of stables. The room into which he was shown was huge and fairly comfortable. It contained a carpet, a mirror hanging between the two windows, a mahogany chest-of-drawers, a winged armchair, a clock under a glass dome, and two candlesticks. . . . All the Abbé's worldly possessions had been collected together into this one room. While Gradère was hastily undressing, he caught a whiff of scent. . . . This must be where the man's sister had slept! He stretched himself between the sheets and thrust his feet against the earthenware hot-water bottle. What bliss! Whoever would think of looking for him here? What human power could snatch him from this priest who was now his surety? But wasn't he due to leave the next morning by the six o'clock train? Should he telegraph to the police-magistrate? He looked at the Abbé's face, which was in shadow, but could not read its expression. He tried to say something, but became entangled in his words. He realized that the other would think him delirious, and redoubled his efforts. The Abbé interrupted him. He said that he had met Madame Desbats that afternoon, and had read what was printed in the paper. He spoke reassuringly. His advice was that Gradère should write a letter. If necessary, he would add a few lines himself. . . . No doubt a judicial commission of enquiry would be sent down to question him. . . . His presence in the presbytery could easily be explained as the result of his quarrel with Desbats.

"I don't want to be the cause of your having to tell lies."

It was not difficult for the criminal in the bed to realize the scruples which, he imagined, his simple-minded host must be feeling. The Abbé gave a shrug.

"As soon as it's light I'll go and see Clairac. We'll tell him the

same story—that because of a family quarrel you have been compelled to lodge with me.”

It was Alain who took every decision, as though he had foreseen precisely this situation, and had devoted many days to thinking about it. Standing well away from the sick man, who was already showing signs of drowsiness, he studied him carefully. He thought to himself: ‘I did not know that I was waiting for him.’ Then, he came nearer, successfully fought down his feeling of repulsion, and looked at the hot, feverish face. Nothing that had happened in the man’s life had been able to change by a jot the purity of the original design, the clean lines of forehead, nose and mouth. Not time nor evil-doing had debased the indestructible geography of that face. ‘He lies there just precisely as you handed him over to me. Once I repulsed him, now I have taken him in. I could do no other than take him in.’ Every fresh disaster that the presence of the man beneath his roof threatened to let loose upon him, Alain had accepted in advance, not trying, even, to guess at its nature. He must act as circumstances should dictate, blindly. He lowered the shade of the lamp, took his rosary, lost himself in meditation, and fell asleep.

In the middle of the night Gradère awoke. It was borne in upon him that for some minutes, some hours, perhaps, he had been conscious of a faint grunting. The head of his sick-nurse was moving restlessly against the back of his chair. He, for his own part, felt cooler, and in better fettle than he had been for a long time. He could not remember that he had ever known such peace of mind. He glanced towards the window, and was reassured. No sign of light announced the coming day. This blessed night had still some distance to go. The wind had dropped, and the tormented tree-tops no longer moaned under the winter stars. It was that hour, just before the dawn, which the majority of men know nothing of.

Gradère’s eyes were fixed upon the sleeping Alain, and a

strange and very powerful feeling came to him. He had the illusion that the young priest in the chair was himself, that, in some other life, he had *been* this young man in black with the rather stocky body and the worn face. In another life? or in Somebody's mind? As, by the light of the lamp, he watched with an urgent tenderness this double of himself, his attention was caught and held by the animal grunting of the sleeping man. He noted the hanging lower jaw, the thick, prominent lip which looked almost as though it were bleeding. The soul had withdrawn from the sightless face. No longer did the light that came from a fundamental purity illumine from within the animal exterior. 'He might have been me'. . . Alain might have yielded to his sister's influence, might have chosen the way of surrender, might have become the slave of obscure desires. . . . Desires which had filled him with horror when, as a child, he had become aware of their existence. . . . But he might, very easily, have overcome that horror, as Gradère had done. He might have grown used to the hidden monsters in his heart, might have tamed, flattered, fed, forgorged them, and more than satisfied their cravings. . . .

The Abbé awoke with a start. Gradère closed his eyes and felt his hand upon his forehead. Then he heard a muffled sound upon the floor. Alain had knelt down and was reading his breviary. After a fairly long time, he laid it down upon the bedside table, and very quietly left the room. Gradère raised himself on his pillows, took up the black book, opened it at random, and came upon a reproduction of Rembrandt's "Christ and the Travellers of Emmaus." On the back was written:

*In memory of my ordination, 3rd June, 19 . . . Alain Forcas, priest.
Thou shalt walk before the Lord to give knowledge of Salvation unto
His People, of the Remission of Sins, of the Tenderness of His
Mercy, bringing light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow
of death, to guide their feet into the way of peace.*

Gabriel put the breviary back upon the table, and lay down in a state of calm lucidity. From the depths of his crime he looked up and saw this destiny as the very antipodes of his own, yet so close to him. *He* might have had the power to absolve, to lighten and to deliver, while yet remaining the same Gabriel Gradère. The one poor merit of which a man may, before God, avail himself, is that of having accepted the burden of being chosen—at least if he belongs to that race of men in whose eyes the things of this world are an unending delight. We have but one life. Gradère might, perhaps, be forgiven, but never again would he be the child who once had waked on summer mornings of holiday, and taken off his shoes and stockings the better to feel the warm sand under his feet, and stood in the stream, letting the water of the Balion eddy and divide about the dark columns of his legs. He had passed for ever that milestone on his road where those who are called by name must rise and leave all that is theirs.

EPILOGUE

“**W**ELL,” said Mathilde as she walked up the front steps,”
“everything went off splendidly. . . .”

They were standing, all three of them, by the front door, Catherine, Andrès and old Desbats, made one by a shared feeling of tense anxiety, and eagerly waiting to hear what she would say. But for a while she said nothing more. She drank in the air, and, for a few moments, closed her eyes. It had been raining. Cockchafers were booming, and a wind from the east had touched all the lilacs of the little town.

“So far as I could gather from the curé, who was present at each occasion of the Commission’s sittings, the magistrate treated Gradère as a very sick man, and never seems seriously to have suspected him for a moment. . . .”

She broke off, and glanced round her uneasily.

"Let's not stay out here. . . ."

When they were all ensconced in the "Arsenal" she began again, speaking very quietly.

"The police have no idea at all where the woman went to. Because, when she left Paris, Gradère was already established here with the family, no notice has been taken of the anonymous letter which indicated, in the vaguest terms, that he was the guilty party. Furthermore"—with a glance at her husband—"they have been able to piece together two letters (unsigned and without envelopes), both of them typewritten, to which a postscript had been added: *Whatever you do, write nothing that might arouse G.'s suspicions. He would most certainly find some way to prevent you from coming.* . . . This was interpreted in Gradère's favour. The magistrate is quite convinced that the murderer is the man who wrote those letters."

"But in that case," broke in Desbats in a frightened voice, "I might be accused. . . ."

Catherine put her arm round his neck.

"Poor, dear papa," she said, "you're crazy!"

Mathilde did her best to reassure him:

"Gradère," she went on, "made an excellent impression by saying that he had long been out of touch with the circles in which Aline moved: that for years he had had nothing to do with her except to help her occasionally with money. Actually, they have found a number of cheque counterfoils, as well as an account book, which go to prove how generous he was to her."

Desbats, struggling for breath, said again:

"They'll say it was I. . . . I shall be charged . . ."

He had a fit of choking. Catherine had brought down everything needed for an injection. He was, by this time, beyond speech, but his eyes never left his wife's lips. She continued with her efforts to reassure him.

"But I've told you already, they are closing the enquiry. The magistrate has left for Bazas, and there will be no further questioning. . . . Besides, Gradère is in a very bad way. Clairac is of the opinion that the other lung is affected, and that the progress of the disease will be very rapid. It is too late to try a pneumothoracic operation. The end might be delayed if he were willing to go to Switzerland, but he won't hear of leaving the presbytery. Fortunately, the Abbé is prepared to keep him there. Really, for the last four months, while all this has been going on, our poor little curé has been magnificent. . . . It's no fun to have a sick man like that on the premises . . . and, at his age, there is considerable risk of infection."

Desbats recovered sufficient breath to say that the curé knew perfectly well that they wouldn't let him be the loser, and that he stood to get a substantial sum of money. Still, there was no getting away from it: he *had* done the family a great service. Mathilde smiled, shrugged, and, turning to Andrès, remarked:

"Ever since he took a turn for the worst, the Abbé has been sitting up with him every other night. Young Lassus' aunt relieves him. . . . But he really is at the end of his tether. I told him that you would lend a hand to-night. He'll be expecting you about eleven."

Andrès growled something about having more than once offered to help, but that the sick man had refused to see him. . . .

"Yes, from a sense of shame. . . . But since this morning your father has become resigned to the idea of meeting you. He's a totally different man, He has changed quite unbelievably. . . . He even wanted to give himself up to the police. It was only with the greatest difficulty that the Abbé kept him from doing so. He only managed it at last by talking to him of you, Andrès. . . ."

Desbats, who had got up and was now clinging to Catherine's arm, turned round at this and said with malicious emphasis:

"You're not going to be taken in by that, I hope! He's got more

than one trick up his sleeve! I shan't know a moment's peace until . . ."

Mathilde motioned to Andrès not to say anything. When they were alone, she remarked in a colourless voice:

"I'm going up to your uncle's room to take over from Catherine. Go outside and wait for her to come down."

Andrès took an overcoat and sat on the front steps. He could hear the frogs and the fluttering of wings in the drenched lilacs. Over towards Frontenac, two nightingales were calling to one another in notes of melancholy tenderness. But he took notice of these things only insofar as they gave him information about the time of day, the season of the year, and the likelihood of it being fine on the morrow. All that interested him in the sky was the direction in which the clouds were moving.

He felt very tranquil. His criminal father was at the point of death. He would marry Catherine. Once again, life was becoming simple and normal. At last he was freed from the agony that had been lying so heavy upon him for the last four months. He had no right to raise difficulties. He had detached himself from, had utterly renounced, everything that he had wanted in the days before this crime, everything that, directly or indirectly, was associated in his mind with the memory of his father. He wanted never again to hear talk of love or of any silliness of that kind. He would live, he would have children, he would be rich. . . . And then, what? Every now and again he would go into Bordeaux for a spree. . . . Provided, always, that there were no complications, that no letter turned up, that no witnesses appeared unexpectedly. And what about the body? He had put that question, one evening, to Tamati. . . . "I know nothing," she had stammered in reply. . . . "except that it can't be found. . . ." Anyhow, his father would cheat justice by conveniently dying. . . .

He heard Catherine hurrying down the stairs. She was breathing heavily.

"Let's go for a walk, dear, shall we?"

She took him off. In her absence he had nothing for her but feelings of friendship and gratitude. But when she was with him, she got on his nerves. He resented especially the hunger for him which she found it so impossible to disguise. This evening, she, too, seemed as though a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. If only this storm would move away! It was her turn now to know happiness. She had certainly paid heavily enough for it in advance! Pressed close to Andrès, she walked by the Frontenac meadows. Far off, the two nightingales were still calling. Because of the distance, the purity of their notes sounded unreal.

"How clear the sky is—look!" she exclaimed.

With a bored air Andrès raised his eyes and saw, through a gap in the branches, an expanse of rain-washed blue.

"What of it?" he asked.

"Let's sit down on this bench."

She buried her face in his shoulder and did not move. He tried not to see her.

"I'm going to sit up with my father to-night. I only hope he doesn't say anything."

She begged him not to think about that man. It was all over now, the whole wretched business:

"I am so happy."

He felt her cold lips on his neck, and his body suddenly remembered Tota. There came an uprush of feeling for the woman he had lost. No sooner had the danger in which his father was involved been swept aside, than the other pain came back, the pain that really mattered, his secret poison, the love without which life would be impossible. What was he doing on this bench?—at the mercy of this female creature's skinny little hands, of this praying mantis? He dared not move, fearful lest he compromise himself. He sat on, aping death.

Catherine knew perfectly well that he had no feeling for her,

that he was a corpse. . . . But in that corpse lay all her satisfaction. She held between her arms the adored being whose thoughts, the while, were far away. She had, at least, his body, and that was better than nothing. With the tips of her fingers, and as though absent-mindedly (but really with what concentration!) she just touched the down that covered the coarse hand.

He was feeling all that Tota would have felt at this moment. He heard, as she would have heard, the nightingales singing in the Frontenac woods. They were so far away that their call seemed to come from some unknown world. He saw, with Tota's eyes, through the black tracery of the branches, a faintly muted azure, a sky poor in stars, as though the constellations had not yet been created. It had the fresh look of Eden in its infancy, after the ending of the primal chaos. All that he was incapable of imagining for himself, he knew through the medium of Tota, so strong was her presence in him. Yet, at the same time, he was Andrès, a youth of twenty-two, half peasant, little more than a brute beast. He would break through every obstacle and go to her without asking permission of the little curé. He needed nobody now. . . . All the same, he must be careful in his dealings with Catherine, and marry her without further delay. Once that was done. . . .

The girl, her head on Andrès' breast, could feel the faintly quickened beating of his heart. But she had no presentiment of tragedy. Suddenly, with a sigh, he pushed her from him, though not roughly, and seemed to be listening. She looked at him uneasily. In a low voice (as though he were hearing them for the first time in his life) he said:

"The nightingales. . . ."

Mathilde, too, heard them, though the windows of Symphorien's room were shut. Lying there in a haze of smoke from his herbal cigarettes, the upper part of his body supported on pillows, he had fallen asleep. But even in sleep, terror had fast hold of him.

Every now and again he gave vent to groans and protestations of innocence.

She drew aside the curtains and pressed her face to the glass. She could hear the sound made by the Balion as it dashed over its stony bed, and, from over Frontenac way, the plaint of the two birds. Symphorien had told her not on any account to open the casement "because of all the pollen and muck" that made his crises worse. . . . But she felt unable to breathe in the fetid atmosphere of the room. The mingled smell of cigarette smoke and urine had an asphyxiating effect on her. Only a thin pane of glass stood between her and the freshness of the night air, between her and the milky whiteness of the foaming stream, the rustling darkness that lay upon the late lilac and the early hawthorn. Her fingers touched the latch, but she withdrew them.

She had changed her mind. The Abbé had said to her—"Do not worry yourself about the part you played in this crime. You are absolved from all guilt, of that I can assure you, but on condition that you accept, from now on, the duty of attending to your husband's every want. God asks of you complete acquiescence, unconditional surrender." At first obedience to this injunction had brought her only peace and happiness. But this evening, for the first time since her confession, she had felt that she could bear no more.

She was conscious of feeling strangely alive and strangely free. Was it because human justice had withdrawn from Gradère, because the shadow of death that lay already upon the criminal was about to swallow up the whole squalid tale? Now that the blood was flowing with renewed vigour through her veins, why should she be bound to a man who was already half dead, whose very sleep bore the imprint of mortality? The others had lost no time. They were picking up again the clue of their happiness: yes, Andrès and Catherine . . . Andrès and Catherine. At this very moment they were walking in the darkness, were

together, were united. . . . She let the curtain fall and slipped into her dressing room. Its only source of light was an attic window. In order to get a breath of the night air she climbed on to a stool on which stood a pile of bound copies of *Illustration* which served to distract Symphorien when sleep would not come. She stretched her head out into the glimmering, the branchy and star-filled darkness. She felt upon her face the coolness of the damp air. From the croaking Frontenac meadows came the smell of growing water-plants. The wind had changed and was no longer heavy with the scent of lilac. The heavy woman grotesquely perched upon a scaffolding of books, her elbows scraped by the roof-tiles, took her fill of the perfumed, rain-washed, darkness. She was just a woman now, with all a woman's longings.

"Mathilde!"

The volumes of *Illustration* collapsed. The breathless voice went on:

"Something tells me you have opened the attic window."

She went back into the room, protesting her innocence. "I haven't, really I haven't. I knocked over the stool by mistake, that's all. Go to sleep. I'm going to bed, too." She laid her hand upon the bald, perspiring forehead. So acrid was the air of the room that she held her breath. By a supreme effort of the will, she forced herself to pray, knowing full well that she would find no message, no comfort, in words learned by rote, words which did not come from her heart. She prayed, though she belonged to that race of dead souls who never hear God's answer. She prayed, conscious of nothing but the wheezing of asthmatic lungs, and, far away, in spite of the closed windows, from beyond the meadows, the sound of the stream punctuated by the song of the two nightingales. It ceased, perhaps because the two birds had found one another at last, and nothing broke the silence but the gurgling of swift water flowing beneath the alders.

The door was opened noiselessly (as only Catherine knew how to open it). Mathilde saw the girl's shadowy form slip into the room.

"Wouldn't you like a breath of fresh air, mamma? Andrès has gone across to the presbytery. He'll be watching there till dawn. . . . Stay out as long as you want to. . . . It's a marvellous night."

Mathilde got up. She could not see her daughter's face, but she had only to hear the girl speak to know that she was happy, that she was experiencing that unexpected bliss of those who know that all life's riches are theirs. . . . She thanked her in a flat voice, saying that, yes, a little air would do her good.

The moon was rising. Instead of following the main avenue, Mathilde turned into a path whose sandy surface seemed whiter in the darkness than it did in daylight, and stopped without a moment's hesitation in front of a certain pine-tree, the very tree which, thirty years before, had formed the back wall of the hut, the "jouquet." It had not changed. On its huge trunk the gashes of that earlier time showed now as ancient scars. She who once had been a young girl, now leaned her withered cheek against it. With her forehead pressed to the bark, her eyes shut, drunk with memories and broken by life, she saw in the backward of her childhood the glimmer of the boy Gradère's blue eye. Figures pressed in upon her: Adila, the servant of the poor and ailing, who also had been a wild young madcap; Andrès, the beloved young animal; a woman known as Tota, another called Aline, and the priest. . . . At last courage was given her to look with steady gaze upon the terror that had grown, through fifty years, in this small corner of the world, between these creatures of a day, beneath the everlasting eyes. It would continue still, in Andrès, in Catherine, in the children who would spring from them . . . and in her, too, for she must drain to the dregs an old age that might well be interminable (but her desire, never would *that* be drained!), an unknown sequence of long, tormenting years.

Death would not cry halt to what the dead had started. Gabriel might disappear—since it is the law of life that poison shall outlive the reptile who has carried it. But from whom had that other Gradère, the small boy with the blue eyes, received the dreadful heritage? Where shall we find our beginnings? What growing reeds must we push aside to discover the source of the tainted stream?

And yet another power, she did not doubt it, existed somewhere. Adila had been saved: the young and criminal creature who had corrupted her was already more than half way to eternity. Even at Liogeats the hope that lives in human hearts had won its victory. Love had conquered, the love whose true lineaments are hidden from the eyes of this world. . . . Though from it she had never received any apparent aid, though it had given her no answer, she would press towards it blindly, believing in the light, with praying hands outstretched—because of the grace that had been granted her, because once her eyes had gazed upon a man who spoke with God in the shabby Liogeats presbytery. But it was not for herself that Mathilde sought salvation, nor with a mind dwelling on her own eternity, for what lay beyond the life of the body she could not grasp in thought. True to her womanhood, she was drawn by every fibre back to Andrès. Of the faith that had been rekindled in her heart to a flicker of uncertain flames, she treasured, first and foremost, the power it gave her to suffer for another. If only it could bring some happiness to the child she loved so well, then gladly would she consent to live and die in the squalor of that fetid room.

“It is time I went to sit with my father,” Andrès had said.

He knew that the Abbé Forcas would not be expecting him before eleven, but he could no longer bear the feel of Catherine’s head upon his shoulder. She had suggested going with him as far as the first houses of the town, and he could think of no excuse

for getting rid of her. But as soon as they reached the outskirts, he said good night and went on alone.

The moon was shining full upon the plastered front of the presbytery. He had still three-quarters of an hour to kill, and meant to enjoy his liberty until the last possible moment. It was not his father whom he feared: the sick man scarcely spoke at all now. But the Abbé, that was the man whose gaze he must endure . . . the priest who had, perhaps, the gift of second-sight. . . . He would read the thoughts in Andrès' heart . . . perhaps he would renew his pleading. "I took your father in when he was dying—do not repay good with evil—leave my sister in peace . . ." What weapon could he use against that sort of blackmail? He did not know how to lie, had never been able to conceal his intentions. The best thing he could do would be to answer evasively. How he hated these people who were intent on poisoning life!—who did all they could to make others as miserable as they were themselves!

Thus brooded the young man as he turned the corner of the house. He raised his eyes and looked across the kitchen-garden wall at the building beyond.

His father's nightlight shone in the dark orifice of a bedroom. The first thing that caught his attention was a dark form at the open window. The Abbé must be sitting on the sill, his head resting against the wall, because his silhouette stood out against the lighted interior like a figure on a Chinese lantern. The collar of his soutane was unfastened, his head bent slightly backwards. Andrès thought: 'He is enjoying the night air.' We see the outline of a seated man but not the troubles that torment him. For the last hour the Abbé had been engaged in pacifying his patient. Gradère was to take Communion in the morning, but, racked by panic, felt, each moment, the need to renew his confession, remembering some item of baseness that he had omitted from the tale. Once again the young priest had succeeded in calming him.

The murderer lay now with a smile of heavenly peace upon his lips.

Then, and then only, had Alain, quite worn out, gone over to the window. He had poured out on this man all his faith, all his hope, all his love. He felt empty, as though his treasure had been taken from him. The Balion, a bare stone's-throw away, eddied above the deep hole into which Gradère had dropped his spade on the night of the crime. Now and again the breeze set the poplars on the river bank quivering, and when the rustle of the leaves died down, the Abbé could hear far off the singing of two hidden nightingales. The darkness was like a human presence. Its quiet breath of sleep touched his hair and dropped to silence. It brought to him the smell of wild mint from the river bank, the scent of syringas in the gardens of the town, now in flower, of the last of the lilac. From the room on his right came an insistent murmur (broken at times by a cough, by the sound of a spittoon being moved on the bed-table) from which emerged occasionally the words, "Pray for us miserable sinners."

This enemy of men's souls, this murderer, was going in peace to Heaven, was leaving this world with a heart that overflowed with joy. But the man of chastity who had sheltered him beneath his roof, who had saved him from despair and given him absolution, felt at this moment troubled and tormented. Not that he had to fight any of those specific temptations which he would have strangled even before they had fully taken shape. He would have found it hard to say what this vague distress might be that swelled his heart, this longing for tenderness and tears. It was nothing at which he need feel horror, nothing for which he need even have blushed. . . . Yet, to feel himself no longer in the presence of God, to have lost contact with God, set an immense confusion in his mind. He had not wholly lost Him, and deep in his heart love was still a living reality. The living love still dwelt within him. . . . It was simply that his poor heart had just slightly

turned aside to contemplate another aspect of existence, to look at the face that life showed in the throbbing darkness. He was being assailed by the scented dark and the sappy odours of the earth. Within that room a man lay dying who had never ceased to keep faith with the flesh, obedient to its every demand, so wholly subservient to its will that he had even committed crime in its name. Yet he was sleeping now in the arms of God. 'Peace has come to him at the end'—thought Alain: 'but oh! my God, I have, since the beginning, agreed that You alone should live in my heart. I have shared You with nobody, and all that this darkness brings I would strangle without regret as often as might be necessary, because it is You I love.'

At the sound of the door opening he turned his head and saw Andrès. Moving from the window, he shook hands with the young man who stood there, taking in the appearance of the room—not of the bed on which his father lay dozing, but of the room which he knew had once been Tota's. The priest realized at once that she was uppermost in Andrès' mind, and a rancorous anger began to rise in him, a feeling of hatred which he recognized for what it was, for he had long been used to keeping a careful watch upon himself. At once he bent the whole power of his will to keep in subjection this savage uprush of emotion. He did his best to smile, to answer the questions which the young man was putting to him in a low voice.

But deep inside him insidious words were forming: 'See what delight he feels at being within these four walls. . . . His father matters nothing to him. It is of her that he is thinking, of Tota . . . nor need he fall back upon conjectures. . . . Nobody has known her better than he—nobody!'

"How pale you are!" said Andrès: "are you sure that you're feeling all right?"

The Abbé shook his head without replying. He was clenching

his teeth. He muttered something about needing air, and, while Andrès took his place beside the bed, went back to the window. The nightingales were now asleep, the poplars had ceased their rustling. 'Did I yield to my impulse of hatred?'—he asked himself in an access of mental torment: 'Am I still in a state of grace?' Would he be able, in a few hours' time, to say his Mass? 'Well,' murmured that same voice of the tempter, 'why not refrain from going to the altar to-morrow morning? Where there is the slightest doubt. . . .' But what reason for his defection could he give young Lassus? No longer seeing his way plain before him, Alain clung to a rule that he had made his own: to surrender to a very lunacy of trust: to be trusting even to the brink of lunacy. But what of sacrilege? The memory that he could never silence brought to his mind a fragment of the Gospel: *Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And the servants took him and cast him into outer darkness.*

But now the sick man had awakened, and was speaking in a low voice to Andrès. The Abbé, from the depths of his temptation, lost not a word of what they were saying. "I am dying in peace, dear Andrès"—Gradère repeated more than once—"in a peace beyond imagining." Then, in Alain's heart, the old grievance rose again. He had been cheated, robbed! What mockery, what derision! This criminal would be saved, but he . . . he was lost. . . . And yet, in spite of the stormy surface of his spirit, another voice, muted by distance, made itself heard within his heart across a great chasm of misery: "I am there, fear not. I am there for ever."

The young priest's head was damp with sweat. He leaned it against the cross-piece of the window-frame. (How often during his nights of vigil had he gazed with adoration at this cross made by the window against the blackness of the night!) On his forehead he could feel the bruise made by the great nail, and, on his hair, the warm blood trickling from the sacred feet. For such a

baptism was he born. He felt suffocated by love. He closed his eyes.

Gradère called to him. He gave a start and went across to the bed. Andrès, his head turned away, was standing a little apart.

"What in the world is there that I can give you in exchange for all that you have given me. . . . The boy has pledged me his word . . . you know what I am talking about, don't you? . . . You need not fear him any longer. That's so, isn't it, Andrès? Tell him yourself."

The young man made a sign of assent, but he did not turn round. Deep silence filled the room.

"I'll sit with him for the rest of the night," said the Abbé. "I'm used to it. You go to bed."

Andrès got up and kissed his father on the forehead. Alain went downstairs with him and drew the bolt of the front-door. On the worn steps, every wrinkle of which stood out clearly in the moonlight, they stood facing one another. At that moment a simple look, a pressure of the hand, was enough to express the regard that the two men felt for one another.



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